

What's the Deal With the Weird Healing Pool in John 5?

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[0:01] Welcome back. Today's question is, what's going on in John 5 with the pool at Bethesda? Was there a magical healing pool? Does Jesus sanction this healing method?

If Jesus didn't sanction this pool, why doesn't he condemn it? I'll read John 5. 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, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralysed, waiting for the movement of the water.

For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water. Then whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was made well of whatever disease he had. Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, he said to him, Do you want to be made well? Well, the sick man answered him, Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up.

[1:00] But while I am coming down, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, Rise, take up your bed and walk. And immediately the man who was made well took up his bed and walked.

And that day was the Sabbath. The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, It is the Sabbath, it is not lawful for you to carry your bed. He answered them, He who made me well said to me, Take up your bed and walk.

Then they asked him, Who is the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk? But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn a multitude being in that place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, See, you have been made well.

Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you. The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. So there are a lot of things going on in this passage.

And I'll briefly outline some of the things that I think are important here. But we have this pool that is supposedly one with healing properties.

[2:01] And that description of the healing properties is particularly found in verse 4. Now, the end of verse 3 and the beginning of verse 4, they're both missing from some of the older manuscripts.

And so a number of commentators and versions will leave out these verses. And that is significant. They may not actually be in the original text. They give an explanation that helps to explain some details that we find elsewhere, though.

That this pool is expected to have healing properties. It's something that we can deduce from elsewhere in this particular passage. This rush to get into the water once it's been stirred up and other people getting in before.

And we see that in verse 7. And so it gives an explanation. It helps us to understand why this man was around this pool, why these sick people were around the pool, and why the man was struggling to get into the pool at that particular time.

And so it is an unusual story in many respects. But it helps to understand some of the background that we have within the text more generally.

[3:17] So first of all, we need to consider the water theme that is playing throughout the book of John's Gospel. So you have water of John the Baptist's baptism.

You have the water turned into wine. The ritual water of purification. And that's important. It's not just any old water. This is water that's used for purification and ritual work.

And that is turned into wine in chapter 2, the wedding in Cana. And then in chapter 3, we have the reference to being born of water and the Spirit.

Then in chapter 4, we have the living water and the well of Jacob. And now in chapter 5, we have this pool that's supposed to have healing properties.

We'll elsewhere see further things. The crossing of the Sea of Tiberias in chapter 6. In chapter 7, Jesus pouring out living water. And giving living water so that it can come from people's hearts.

[4 : 24] And so this is a running theme within the book. And when we get to chapter 9, what we also see is that there is a parallel passage.

And it helps us to interpret some of the details of this passage. So here we have a man who's ill. A man who's infirm. Who's been 38 years with this infirmity.

And he receives a healing. There's an association with a pool. Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Then Jesus goes away.

Then Jesus meets him again and calls him to a sort of faith. And then there's a response. And the Jews are involved in accusations in both cases. So we'll read some of the section of chapter 9.

Now as Jesus passed by, he saw a man who was blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

[5 : 28] Jesus answered, Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him. I must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. The night is coming when no one can work.

As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world. When he had said these things, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva and anointed the eyes of the man with the clay. And he said to him, Go wash in the pool of Siloam, which is translated sent.

So he went and washed and came back seeing. Therefore the neighbours and those who previously had seen that he was blind said, Is not this he who sat and begged?

Some said, This is he. Others said, He is like him. He said, I am he. Therefore they said to him, How were your eyes opened? He answered and said, A man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.

So I went and washed and I received sight. Then they said to him, Where is he? He said, I do not know. And then there's the accusations about healing on the Sabbath.

[6 : 33] Jesus meets with the guy in the temple. He's cast out of the synagogue. And then at the end, he becomes a believer in Christ. And so there's a significant parallel, but also a contrast is here.

There's two similar sorts of healings. And then there's the challenge to faith in both cases at the end. But the person in chapter five does not come to true faith.

Rather, he turns back to the Jews. The person in chapter nine is turned away from the Jews and cast out of the synagogue. And Jesus comes to him and he comes to a true faith and following Christ and believing in Christ as the son of God.

So there is a significant parallel, but also significant differences. Further things to notice. This is playing off the background of a number of older stories.

So we're told now a certain man was there who had an infirmity 38 years. Why that specific? Why that particular number? I mean, why not around 40 years or for many years had had an infirmity?

[7 : 44] Why be that specific? 38 years? Well, I think one place that we will find a clue is in Deuteronomy chapter two.

In Deuteronomy chapter two, 14, we read. And the time we took to come from Kadesh Barnea until we crossed over the valley of the Zered, was 38 years until all the generation of the men of war was consumed from the midst of the camp, just as the Lord had sworn to them.

And so the period of wandering in the wilderness as a result of the sin rebellion of Israel was 38 years. The 40 years there altogether, that 38 years as a result of their unfaithfulness.

Now this man here is associated with, there is sin associated with the fact he's had this infirmity. See, you have been made well, sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.

And so there is this infirmity that he has, but this infirmity does have sin associated with it. For some reason there has been, he's been in this condition for 38 years as a result, in part, of sin.

[8 : 59] And that should draw our minds back to the situation of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 38 years as a result of their sin. Also, the significance of where this is, this is at the Sheep Gate.

It's next to a pool and they're waiting for it to be troubled so that he can go into the city. And he's not allowed into the city in part because those who are lame, blind and infirm weren't allowed into the holy city.

And so he enters into the holy precincts when he's healed. But that leads to a number of significant associations. The troubling of the waters, again, we see that's a possible allusion to the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan.

The waters saw you, O God. The waters saw you. They were afraid. The depths also trembled. The clouds poured out water. The skies sent out a sound. Your arrows also flashed about, etc.

Your way was in the sea, your path in the great waters, and your footsteps were not known. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron. That's Psalm 77, 16 following.

[10:18] And so the description of being the people of God being led like a flock, like sheep, through the troubled waters is significant. So here we have a man who's been infirm, in part as a result of sin, for 38 years.

He can't enter into the holy place. He's left outside waiting for the waters to be troubled among the flock so that he can enter into the holy place. And that should ring some alarm bells.

There's something happening here. And what's happening is it's playing out of the pattern of the Exodus, that he's stuck in the wilderness position.

And there's a number of other things playing off this, because this isn't just a story about an individual. This is a story about the state of Israel. This is a story about the paradigmatic people who hear Christ's word, receive his healing and his grace.

Will they respond in a proper way? And so Jesus comes along and he heals this man. This man does not go into the pool at all. He's healed and he's brought into the city.

[11:25] He's told to take up his bed and walk. And so he goes into the city, taking up his bed. This instrument of rest is associated with rest.

And Jesus, or Joshua, takes him into the city, brings him into the place of rest, the place of arrival and God's presence.

And then that's a test. Is he going to respond in the right way? Having received that healing, is he going to respond in faith to Christ? Or is he going to turn back to the Jews?

And he turns back to the Jews. And so there are these two parallel healings. In the case of John 9, the man is healed by being sent to the pool of Siloam.

Now that, I think, can help us to understand what's going on in these different accounts of water. So we've seen a number of the different mentions of water throughout the book of John, that many of these are juxtaposed with what Christ brings.

[12:29] So the baptism of John is going to be eclipsed by the work of Christ. The waters of ritual purification are transformed into wine by Christ.

Unless you're born of water and the Spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. And there's this baptism of the Spirit. Being born again of the Spirit, that needs to occur. Now what is the baptism by water?

It could be John's baptism. And John's baptism also harks back to the earlier baptism, that Israel was born through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan. This was their birth event.

And John draws people back to that. And Jesus talks about the need for something even more. This baptism by the Holy Spirit that comes at Pentecost.

And then in chapter 4, we have the waters, living waters, that will spring up within people. And waters of eternal life that people will never thirst again.

[13:33] And that again is contrasted with the waters of Jacob's well, all these sorts of things. And when we get to chapter 5, I think what we're seeing is the original waters of the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan into the Promised Land, that there's going to be a greater bringing into rest that's going to occur.

And we see those sorts of contrasts and parallels in the next chapter, as Jesus crosses over the Sea of Tiberias, leading a multitude like a flock to a place with much grass and then sort of pasture.

He is the good shepherd. And so he goes to the place. He treats people like sheep in need of healing and help and assistance. And so Jesus goes to the sheep gate, to the infirm of the flock who cannot enter in.

He goes to lead the people out to good pasture through the waters. And he's the one who, like Moses, he's the good shepherd who leads his people like a flock.

And then they are fed with the bread from heaven, which contrasts and also is compared with the manna in the wilderness. And so there are both comparisons and contrasts taking place here. [14:52] And what John is doing is, I think, bringing out this comparison, but also this juxtaposition, that Jesus is like Joshua. He brings people into rest.

And so the waters that were troubled, that the people entered, went through to enter into the land, into the realm of God's presence after wandering for 38 years, that this man is stuck in the wilderness.

And it would seem that the way into the land is through the same way that, a similar way that Joshua went in with the people. But Jesus leads him in, in a greater way.

And the problem then is he does not respond in the right way. He turns back. So these two events are juxtaposed and it helps us to read what's going on.

In particular, in relation to the pool, I think it shows that this, it may have been an actual healing pool. But the point is to have it juxtaposed with the healing and the deliverance that Christ brings.

[15:58] Now, there were, there was John's baptism. That was a real baptism. There were the waters of ritual purification of the Jews.

And those really were waters that ritually purified. There was the well of Jacob and there was this, this realm where you could get water from, that you could quench your thirst.

But that's really going to be eclipsed by the living water that Christ brings. And here we see a pool that has genuine healing powers, presumably given by an angel.

And Jesus eclipses those powers still. Jesus is greater than the angels. Jesus is greater than the ritual purification of the Jews. Jesus is greater than the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan. He brings people into a greater rest. He brings the baptism of the Holy Spirit so that they are born not just of the waters of the Red Sea. And it's recalled in the baptism of John and the crossing of the Jordan.

[17:08] But he brings them something more. He brings them the baptism of Pentecost, that entrance into a new form of life. Now, none of this is opposed to baptism or water washing in general.

And that's significant in chapter 9, when Jesus affects the healing by telling the man to go to this pool. And the pool is called sent, and that is significant.

It's not some inherent powers within the pool. Rather, it's the means by which he is called to enter into life. He's sent to the pool, like Naaman was sent to wash in the Jordan.

And he washes in this pool, and he comes back, and he sees. He's enlightened. And this, I think, helps us to understand some of the sacramental themes that are playing with in John.

There are juxtapositions, but also there are positive statements being made. So Jesus is greater than all these ritual purifications in the past. Jesus is greater than all these washings in the past.

[18:13] All these water crossings. Jesus is greater than the healing properties of various pools. And so he brings something greater.

But it is also associated with washing. It is associated with the waters of baptism. And Jesus sends this man to the waters to be washed in order that he might be enlightened and enter into life.

And so that is part of what's going on. In the same way in John 6, there is a juxtaposition with the manna and other sorts of things. The sacrifices, these sorts of things in the past.

But then there's also a positive statement being made that Jesus is giving his life and his body and his blood. That there is an association there, I think, with the supper.

But this is something that is associated with a greater gift of life. A greater gift of healing. A greater gift of divine sustenance. Putting all these pieces together then, I think what we see is a lot more going on in this passage than initially meets the eye.

[19:26] It's not just on the surface. It's about the broader themes of the book of John. As Jesus is contrasted with other things that came before.

He's the greater than. He is the true vine. He is the true shepherd. He is all these things that eclipse everything that has come before.

Or that represent the true essence of the reality of anything real that has been experienced in the past. And Jesus, as he brings healing to this man, he's making a broader statement about Israel.

It's not just about this is a great healing. It's a sign that he's performing. And the sign is one that has significance in part where it occurs, by the sheep gate.

The entrance into the holy place where the sheep are gathered that can't enter in. And it's upon a man who's been infirm for 38 years in part as a result of sin.

[20 : 26] Again, that's significant. It involves waters being troubled. Again, that's significant. And the bringing in and giving of rest. And so all these themes help us to understand a deeper thing that's taking place within this chapter.

That Jesus is being presented as the greater than Joshua. Jesus is being presented as the one who brings about true entrance into rest. And then we have contrast being drawn.

Not just with the Old Testament sorts of deliverances and entrances into rest. But between two different responses to Christ. The response of the man in chapter 9 who's enlightened, who receives healing from his blindness from birth.

He receives, as it were, a new birth. And this man who is brought into the land but turns away and doesn't actually accept Christ and believe in Christ.

But turns back to the Jewish leaders who have opposed Christ. And so there are two Sabbath events here as well. It's significant. Both of them involve Jesus bringing people into rest.

[21 : 38] And the event in chapter 9, it involves further a contrast between the waters of previous events. So in those previous events, Jesus shows that he's greater than all these waters.

And then in chapter 9 we see Jesus effecting a miracle through the waters. And he calls this man to go to this pool and wash. And that's how he receives his new birth, as it were, an entrance into life. And as he responds in faith to Christ, he becomes a true disciple. And so this is paradigmatic, not just for a more general deliverance, but for every single Christian.

That Christ opens our eyes. Or Christ heals us. Christ sends us to baptism to enter into the full life of his people. And this is associated with enlightenment, with new birth.

And then we return to Jesus in faith and follow him and commit ourselves to him. Even though we are cast out of the societies and the synagogues and all these other things that the early disciples that John was writing to, they would have experienced this personally.

[22 : 54] But this is a paradigm for faith more generally. And so it's a sign, not just a dramatic healing, but telling us something more.

It's a picture of something far greater than just an individual person who has God act in his situation. This, then, I think, helps us to see that the pool of Siloam, although it had some not inherent magical properties, but there was an association with healing.

And presumably we, either this was a superstition and it was not truly a healing pool. It was not a genuinely, divinely established source of healing.

Or it was a genuinely established source of healing. We don't know. A lot depends upon how we read verse 4. Is that included within the text or not?

And I'm not sure on that particular front. We have suggestions that there needs to be some sort of explanation for why they want to get into the pool. But the significance is that this is contrasted with the healing that Christ brings.

[24 : 07] Whether or not it is a true source of healing, whether or not it is a divinely sanctioned thing, the important thing is that there is something greater that has arrived on the scene and that Christ brings a deeper and a truer entrance into life and into rest.

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