

Into Thy Word Ministries Bible Study www.intothyword.org

General Idea: After Jesus' stay at Cana, He returned to Jerusalem where He performed more healings; here Jesus takes the time to heal a lame man. This was during one of the Jewish holiday feasts. Jesus passed by the Sheep Gate to the Pool of Bethesda where people went for physical ailments because of the minerals and a belief that an Angel might heal them. This was a large efface with five covered porches. Many people lay on mats waiting their turn to get into the mineral bath. One man, because of his inability to walk and no one willing to help him, had waited thirty-eight years. Thus, Jesus had compassion for him and asked him a stunning question; *would you like to get well?* The man replied, *I can't, sir. I have no way to get to the waters when they are stirred. Someone always beats me or cuts me off to get there.* Jesus told him, *stand up and pick up your mat and walk!* The man was healed right away. He picked up his mat and did as Jesus summoned him to do—he walked. But a problem arose. Because this was a feast day and the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders felt this was inappropriate; they saw this as work and said *you can't do this; it is even illegal to carry your mat.* (Keep in mind these were their rules, not God's.) The man replied: *the Man who healed me told me to pick up my mat and so I did.* This made the leaders irate and they demanded more information from the man, but he had none to give them. Jesus disappeared into the crowd. Later that day Jesus saw the man in the Temple and told the man to stop sinning or something worse would occur to him. Then the man went and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had healed him.

Contexts and Background:

Healing pools and shrines were very common in the Middle East during biblical times. Some were mineral or hot springs with edifices built around them. Others were shrines to a god like the Greek god, Asclepius. These were very popular and important culturally to the Greeks and Hebrews, where people with limited medical help could use them for getting well or ritual purification. The point here is not that Jesus heals—he certainly can—but more importantly, Jesus is greater than the gods and the cultures, greater than our fears and weakness, greater than our sin and pride, and greater than what people back then thought was important, like healing shrines, and what we think is important today, like what hurts us. Jesus takes us beyond our hurts and fears and truly liberates us. Jesus preformed numerous miracles of which only a few are recorded so as to point to Him as the Promised Messiah, because only God could manipulate matter and will in this way (John 2:11, 23; 5:19-30).

Commentary—Word and Phrase Meanings:

- *Some time later.* An unspecific time reference and adage, like saying “a few weeks” or “a few months” later.
- *Feast of the Jews.* This could have been one of three feast days: Passover, Pentecost, or Booths (also called Tabernacles). However, this term usually applied to the “Feast of the Tabernacles,” a celebration of how God led them through the desert for forty years, providing for them as He continues to do today. It was held in the seventh month of *Tishri* (Sept/Oct), which celebrated the end of the agricultural year that began five days after the Day of Atonement and lasted for seven days. During this festival, the Jews built and lived in booths or tents near the Temple/Tent Meeting in Jerusalem as a reminder of their ancestors, who lived in booths as they wandered in the desert. The word, *Hebrews*, means *wanderer*. (Or, you could call this the great end-of-summer camping trip!) The sacrifices of this feast were usually more numerous than at any other festive day, since they had more with which to celebrate. It corresponds to our New Year's Day, and was celebrated from morning to evening while various types of horns and trumpets were blown. Since this day was also on the *Sabbath*, it was extra special and holy. Jesus could not have picked a better day to challenge the pious frauds of the day (Lev. 23:34-43; Num. 29:12-38; Duet. 16:13-15).
- *There is.* Present active, which would refer to the fact that at the time of John's writing, the pool was still open and thus the destruction of Jerusalem had not occurred yet. Significance? Evidence that John's Gospel was written before 70 A.D.

- *Sheep Gate/market.* This was a gate in the wall of the city of Jerusalem used for sheep as sheep can't be mixed with other animals because they get distracted and then are hard to herd.
- *Bethesda.* This was a medicinal pool that people flocked to for healing. It was very popular, overflowing with people who were desperately seeking relief from their ills. These pools were also called "healing shrines" and were common in the ancient world. Perhaps the mineral salts and the hot temperature provided one's body with the nutrients to promote healing; perhaps it was just psychosomatic, but culturally, it was a place to go to be made well. The pool of Bethesda was considered a myth by liberal attackers of the Bible until it was discovered and excavated in the late 1960's. The pool is located in the north part of the Temple Mount, near what was called Sheep Gate—just as the Bible described. There you might be, sitting in a mineral bath, wondering what that smell was, and it was because of all the sheep going in and out right beside you! This site was rebuilt and became a pagan healing shrine after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.
- *Invalid.* An unknown sickness, probably some wasting disease—like cancer, tuberculosis, or multiple sclerosis or ailment that immobilized him and prevented him from walking, or walking well enough to get where he wanted or needed to be.
- *Thirty-eight years.* It does not mean that this man lay at this pool for 38 years, rather that he had been ill for 38 years.
- *Do you want to get well/made whole?* This is a seemingly strange question, for who would not want to be healed or restored to a better place in life? However, you cannot help someone who does not want to be helped. Either we do not realize we are sick or we like the attention too much when we are. The *want* we are to have is the desire to be transformed and the determination to carry it through with our Lord's empowerment. Determination is the ability to make difficult decisions and accomplish God's goals based on the truths of God's Word, regardless of the resistance that may be encountered. It is the ability to point ourselves toward godly pursuits, and not allow ourselves to be distracted or discouraged (Psalms 33:15; 119:29-30; Isa. 1:5-6; Luke 5:31; Gal. 5:19-21; 2 Tim. 4:7, 8; Heb. 12:12-13).
- *I have no one to help me.* He seemed to have the desire to be healed but not the means. This is, perhaps, a pathetic answer, either out of hopelessness or out of pride. Perhaps this is just an excuse. He is saying that he wants to be healed, but also says he has tried but cannot. It seems he is determined to be hopeless or he likes the attention from being sick. Most people tend to have an entitlement attitude and expect to be carried after they are helped, because they have gotten used to the attention and care they received. But, if Jesus gives you the power to rise, Jesus is the One who can give you the power to continue to walk every day, to keep going (Heb 12:2).
- *Water is stirred/moving.* This refers to a local legend that an Angel would come to stir the pool and then you could be healed. As a Christian, our Lord moves among us, and usually works within the parameters of what we will allow, so when we put up barriers, although He could easily penetrate them, He chooses to do nothing for those who do not want His help (Psalm 139 1-24; Isaiah 40:29; Jer. 29:11; Matt. 7:7-11; 9:12-13; Mark 9:23-24; John 3:16-18; 14:1-3; Phil. 2:12-13).
- *Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.* Miracles are mainly meant to prove Christ's claims and Lordship and His power to transom our lives. Even if Jesus heals us, we have to rise up and follow through (Isa. 35:1-7; John 11:43).
- *Cured/healed.* It seems that faith was not required here like it usually was. Rather, Jesus used this man's situation to show His position and power and allowed this man the grace he did not deserve and would later reject (Matt. 9:22; 13:58; Mark 6:5-6).

- *Law forbids.* This refers to the religious regulations of the Pharisees such as performing medical help that is not life saving on the *Sabbath*. The Law said that the Jews were to keep the Sabbath and not do any work on that day. However, the Pharisees figured they needed to protect this law even more and added 39 different ways the Sabbath could be violated by certain types of work. Jesus violated one of their laws, taking out of context the passage, *Do not bring any burden out of your houses on the Sabbath day* (Num. 16:32; Jer. 17:21-22; Matt. 23:4).
- *Carry your mat.* If the sick man had stayed on his mat, he would have held onto his past identity and problems. The mat would have become the chain to pull him back—back to despair, back to hopelessness.
- *Man who made me well.* An evasion of gratitude and responsibility that led to a slippery slope of betrayal that would lead to our Lord's conflict with the religious leaders and eventually His crucifixion.
- *At the temple.* The man went to the temple because the Law required anyone who had been healed to make a thanksgiving offering. Jesus knew where to find this man who received this incredible gift of healing (2 Sam. 4:4; 1 Kings 14:4; 2 Kings 13:14; 2 Chron. 16:12).
- *Stop sinning.* A call to not go back to whatever we have done in the past that has kept us in sin or oppressed or sick. We have to pour out the alcohol, get rid of the drugs, burn those magazines, and most importantly, surrender our pride! Say *no* to bad friends and devices that lure us on into evil. Get help and accountability because Jesus wants us to walk right, and to grow in our faith with the goals of heartfelt worship and devotion that are contagious to others. He wants us to have a Christ-centered life, not a self-centered life. Jesus wants us to succeed in life, and we do this by desiring to grow His Way, removing the distractions, problems, and potential problems that become barriers that hold us back.
- *Something worse.* Referring to the consequences of sin with current relationships and also with eternity. This does not mean this man's illness was self-inflicted by sin. It could have been, rather, a call to get his life together or he would be back where he was or even worse off (John 9:3; 1 Cor. 11:28-32).

Devotional Thoughts and Applications:

True healing is all about the transforming work Christ does in us. The physical healing is a mere unimportant shadow to His real important redemptive work and how we incorporate Him in our lives.

How can someone not want to be healed? The simple question is—*do we want to grow deeper in the precepts of the Word and character of Christ?* In other words, *do we want to go through the obstructions to our faith and life that stops us dead in our tracks?* Jesus asks that question just as if you were in a 12-step program where you have to admit your need and your higher power before you can get out of your drunken state! I have even seen many people turn their backs on real help. Instead of seeking help for a drinking problem, they stay drunk, destroying all of their relationships, career, hopes, and life. To continue to be sick is a powerful chain that holds us down. Sometimes, it is all we have and all we know, and we fear to venture into wellness. For the Christian, stuck in their faith, he or she has to want to grow in order to grow. The desire to draw near to God will bring down any barrier blocking us from that goal. We have to want to get well in order to do so. We have to want to be more mature and to have more character in order to be people of maturity and good character. Ask any doctor or therapist how important a desire to live and get well is for the patient's recovery and most will say, assuredly, that it is quintessentially important. When a patient gives up, he or she will usually get worse, and sometimes even die. The way of deliverance from suffering is blocked by the bricks the patient laid down himself because he or she did not want to be healed. Of course, sometimes, our willpower and desires cannot help us. Nonetheless, whether we are in a spiritual encounter, a medical surgery, or in therapy, the desire to get well or grow is powerfully important.

People who are weak in the faith or stagnate in their spiritual growth are that way, for the most part, because they do not want to receive divine help with their problems. They do not see God as the equipper and sustainer of their lives. They do not want to be helped out of their weakness; they either think they

can do it on their own, or have given up. They love their weakness; their helplessness is their comfort and identity. Perhaps it is the attention; perhaps it is from years of discouragement, and they are so beaten down they do not want to look up. They rarely, if ever, will seek the help of another. Perhaps, it is anger or pride or fear; whatever the case, they either tend to crave the attention of others through their helplessness, or hide under the bed of discouragement. The result is stagnation and ignoring the One who can bring them comfort. I believe we can all be there at one time or another. I know I have been.

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. What would you do if you were sick and someone came up to you and asked, "Do you want to get well?"
2. What are you like when you are sick? What are your attitudes and behaviors to God and to others? What should they be?
3. What are your thoughts about the sick man? When did you first realize you could trust Jesus for everything? Or have you? What gets in the way?
4. Why do people tend not to see God as the Equipper and Sustainer of their lives? What about some Christians?
5. What causes some people not to want to receive help, either divine or human, with their problems?
6. What needs to happen for you to have a faith that can progress deeper and deeper? How does it help for more of Christ to be revealed to you?
7. When did it hit you that we have a tangible reality of a loving and caring God? How and why is this important for your walk with Christ?
8. Do you want to grow deeper in the precepts of the Word and character of Christ? What do you need to do about it?
9. What do you need to go through the obstructions to your faith and life that stop us dead in our tracks?
10. What it is that holds us back—is it fear? Busyness? Complacency? Bad ideas of what faith is, and how to use it? Bad role models? Not in a small group or Bible study? Or, what?
11. Is there an area of your life where you want to be healed? What needs to happen for you to take up your mat, and walk? What is your part?
12. What blocks you from increasing your trust and faith in Jesus Christ? What can you do to grow in your trusting faith?