

COMMENTARY ON JOHN

\LESSON NUMBER 57

John 5:1 *“After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. ³In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. ⁴For 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.”*(John 5:1-4)

THERE WAS A FEAST OF THE JEWS

INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to properly distinguish the writings of Scripture, particularly dealing within the past, from mere history. Although there is history recorded in the Prophets, their thrust is prophecy. There are other books, which contain prophecy, with the emphasis being the chronicling of past events—i.e. Genesis through Job, Daniel, Jonah, Zechariah, the Gospels, and Acts. These are distinguished from mere history in that they are the recording of the works of God among men. In them, we are being acquainted with Divine manners and purposes. If we fail to discern this, at the very best, we can be experts in the text of Scripture, while missing its significance. The word “history” is not mentioned in the King James Version or the New American Standard, although it is in other versions (NKJV, NIV, NRSV, RSV). In the place of the word “*history*” the King James Version uses “*generations*” or “*records*.” While this is not something of critical importance, it does underscore that in Scripture, **past events are segments of time in which God was working out His purpose**, often in spite of what men were doing. When it comes to the life of Christ, it is essential that we see it as a revelation of God, His purpose, and His nature. Jesus was an ambulatory depiction of the Living God, moving about among men and in places, confirming how God reacts to men, what He can do among men, and what He has determined to do among and with men. So far as His essential Person is concerned, the historical Christ is no different from the One who is presently seated at the right hand of God, administering the Kingdom of God with the purpose of bringing many sons to glory (Heb 2:10). This being true, it is important that we do not develop an erroneous understanding of Christ Himself, for if we do it will be reflected in a flawed view of God, and of His great salvation.

AFTER THIS JESUS WENT UP TO JERUSALEM

John 5:1 *“After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.”*

AFTER THIS. This expression is mentioned fifty-three times in Scripture. It is mentioned five times in the Gospels. It has to do with much more than mere chronology. This is language that portrays Christ as carrying out the will of God, precisely as He had received it. Jesus clearly said, “*For I came down from heaven, not to do Mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me*” (John 6:38). He said His Father “*taught*” Him what to say (John 8:28). He laid down His life according to the Father’s “*commandment*” (John 10:18). The “*works*” He did were, He said, “*the works of My*

Father" (John 10:37). In a very precise statement Jesus said, *"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"* (John 5:19). The words *"after this,"* therefore, are not simply a report of what happened "next." In fact, there may very well have been a number of things that occurred between the time Jesus blessed the woman at Simon's house, and what is now reported.

This is the next event in the Divine agenda.

We understand that God's will is not helter-skelter, sporadic, or spontaneous. This is first seen in the orderly and sequential creation (Gen 1-2). It is also seen in the development and employment of the Jewish nation. Now, we are reading of the working out of the purpose of God. At this point that involved a context in which the death and resurrection of Christ would take place. Followers were being developed, enemies were being positioned, and Jesus Himself was being prepared.

THERE WAS A FEAST OF THE JEWS. Other versions read, *"a festival of the Jews,"* ^{NRSV} and *"Jewish festival."* ^{GWN} This was one of the three annual feasts all of the males of Israel were required to observe: 1- *"Passover"* [Feast of unleavened bread] (Matt 26:17), 2- *"Pentecost"* (Acts 2:1) [Feast of Weeks], 3- *"Tabernacles"* [Feast of ingathering] (Ex 23:14-17; 34:18-22; Deut 16:16; 2 Chron 8:13; John 7:2). We are not told which feast this was.

It is interesting to observe that, when it comes to official annual feasts, as compared to wedding feasts, etc, no practice of heathen nations is mentioned in Scripture. I do not say this to suggest it is wrong to observe national holidays. It is rather to emphasize that **so far as Scripture is concerned, it is what God is doing that is the fundamental and solitary point.** If the established purpose of *"all Scripture"* is really in order *"That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works"* (2 Tim 3:17), it can be no other way.

So far as the life of Jesus is concerned, **God is never presented as directing Jesus to conform to practices that were instituted by men.** So far as Jesus being an *"example"* is concerned, it is in this manner of living within the circumference of the will of God. That is why Jesus said, *"If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither He that is sent greater than He that sent Him"* (John 13:14-16). And again, *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth"* (1 Pet 2:21-22).

In our time there seems to be an inordinate tendency in some to view Christ within the constraints of everyday life, which leads men to consider Him apart from being reconciled to God, given access to God, and being prepared to stand before the Lord. All of this may appear quite innocent, but it is not. God has not provided us *"a record of His Son"* so we can more easily adapt to life in this world. It is rather to assist us in adapting to the world to come, which is destined to replace this world.

JESUS WENT UP TO JERUSALEM. The three major feasts were all observed in Jerusalem (2 Chron 30:21-26). While the Jews were in the wilderness, they observed these feasts in the place God named (Deut 26:2-11). But when they were settled in Canaan, Jerusalem was the gathering point. That is where God placed His name (1 Kgs 11:36).

Jesus is said to have gone *"to Jerusalem"* four different times; the first being when He was twelve years of age: ([Lk 2:41-43]; the second, [John 2:13]; [John 5:1]; and the third [Mk 11:11,15; Lk 17:11; Lk 19:28]). Each occasion appeared to be a time of a feast. After His initial journey there at the age of twelve, the visits were generally related to His death, for He began to speak of His betrayal and death during those times (Matt 17:22-23; 20:18; 26:2).

It is fitting that Jesus should be made known more fully in Jerusalem, *“the city of the Great King”* (Matt 5:35). There were holy associations with God in this city, whether men could see it or not, for that is where He had placed His name (1 Kgs 11:36). That is where the Father had placed the Temple, His *“house”* (John 2:16). That is where *“the day of salvation”* would be launched, and the *“new and living way”* would be announced. Doubtless Jerusalem was of greater significance to Jesus than to any other man. It is the only city over which He wept (Lk 19:41). The prophets said the word of the Lord would go forth from Jerusalem (Isa 2:3). The Messiah would be a *“Father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem”* (Isa 22:1), the *“holy city”* (Isa 52:1).

A PLACE WHERE THE INFIRMED GATHERED

“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.”

BY THE SHEEP MARKET. This is generally considered to be the gate through which sheep were brought in – some for sacrifice, and some for marketing. This gate was rebuilt by *“Eliashib the high priest, and his brethren the priests”* during the wall-rebuilding project headed up by Nehemiah (Neh 3:1,32; 12:39).

Nehemiah’s project took place approximately 500 years before the time of this text. The longevity of the city and its wall together with the various gates in the wall, are noteworthy. Those times were not characterized by changing fads and fashions as exist in our times. In fact, Isaiah wrote, *“And wisdom and knowledge shall be the **stability of thy times**, and strength of salvation: the fear of the LORD is his treasure”* (Isa 33:6). If this is true, then a lack of wisdom and knowledge contributes to the lack of stability and the consequent penchant for *“some new thing”* (Acts 17:21).

THE HEBREW TONGUE. From John thru the Revelation *“the Hebrew tongue”* is mentioned six times (John 5:2; Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14; Rev 9:11; 16:16). When the glorified Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus, He spoke to him in the Hebrew tongue (Acts 26:14). This is also called the *“Jews’ language”* (2 Kgs 18:26,28; Neh 13:24; Isa 36:11,13).

During the time of Nehemiah, the language of the people had become corrupted, owing to the men taking wives from the heathen: *“In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: and their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people”* (Neh 13:23-24). Nehemiah was incensed over this. He wrote, *“And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? yet among many nations was there no king like him, who was beloved of his God, and God made him king over all Israel: nevertheless even him did outlandish women cause to sin. Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?”* (Neh 13:25-27).

The Hebrew language is considered by linguists to be absolutely unique. It is, in a very real sense, a theological language that is built around the very concept of God and His creation. I understand it to be a language inspired by God Himself, and given to the Hebrews.

THE POOL OF BETHESDA. The term *“Bethesda”* means *“house of mercy.”* This was a large pool, similar to what we would call a swimming pool. Some suppose it was what Nehemiah called *“the king’s pool”* (Neh 2:14). This is the only place in Scripture where the word *“Bethesda”* is used.

HAVING FIVE PORCHES. These are also called *“portico,”* ^{NASB} *“colonnades,”* ^{NIV} *“doorways,”*

BBE "covered porches," CEB "roofed colonnades," ESV "covered walkways," NET "rows of columns with a roof over them," NIRV and "alcoves, colonnades, doorways." AMPLIFIED

A GREAT MULTITUDE OF IMPOTENT FOLK. Within these porticos lay "a great multitude of impotent [paralyzed] folk, of blind, halt [lame], withered [bodily parts shrunken and deadened]."

Frequent mention is made in the Gospels of the staggering number of infirm and possessed people where Jesus ministered – particularly in Judaea and Galilee (Matt 4:24; 8:16; 14:14; Mk 1:34; 6:55-56; Lk 4:40). **Why was this so?** In the Old Covenant, contingent on their total obedience, God said diseases would not be among them (Deut 7:15). If they did **not** observe to do all the words of the Law, Moses told the people, "Then the LORD will make thy plagues wonderful, and the plagues of thy seed, even great plagues, and of long continuance, and sore sicknesses, and of long continuance . . . He will bring upon thee all the diseases of Egypt. . . Also every sickness, and every plague, which is not written in the book of this law" (Deut 28:59-61). This is precisely what happened to them.

WAITING FOR THE MOVING OF THE WATER. The infirm gathered on these five porches in hopes of getting into the water when it started moving supernaturally. As we will find, there would not be a mass healing, such as Jesus would many times accomplish (Matt 4:24; 12:15; 14:14; 15:30; Lk 6:19). In this case, only one would be healed, and the multitude came in hopes that one of them would be healed. That is what a spark of genuine hope can do for people!

ANGELIC ACTIVITY

"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."

There are some imagined scholars who doubt the authenticity of this record. However this is Scripture, and "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16). Further, the Scripture does not record fables and folklore for us.

AN ANGEL WENT DOWN. Other versions read, "an angel of the Lord went down," NASB "an angel would go down," CSB "an angel descended," DARBY "an angel of the Lord came." LIVING

AT A CERTAIN SEASON. Other versions read, "a certain time," NKJV "from time to time," CSB "at certain times," DOUAY "a set time," YLT and "at appointed seasons." AMPLIFIED The text does not indicate if the angel came down at the same time all the time, or if he came at unscheduled but fixed times, or appointed times that were not known ahead of time. I prefer the latter, which seems to fit better into the record.

The complete reference to an angel coming down is omitted in the following versions:

GOOD NEWS, GOODSPEED, GOD'S WORD, NIV, NRSV, RSV, ESV, GOD'S WORD, NET, NEW JERUSALEM, NLT, WEYMOUTH, WILLIAMS, MONTGOMERY

TROUBLED THE WATER. The angel came down and went "into the pool." Other versions read, "stirring up the water," NKJV "the water was moved," DOUAY "agitated the water," WEB "disturbed the water," LIVING and "moved and stirred up the water." AMPLIFIED

This whole narrative introduces us to a different kind of angelic activity – imparting healing properties to a pool of water by agitating its waters. Further, there was strict management of the ministry, with only the first person getting into the pool being healed. Here again, healing is traced back to the Lord – whether it is a miraculous dismissing of a condition (Mat 8:15), using a lump of figs (2 Kg 20:7), the use of salt (2 Kgs 2:21), or some other means (Col 4:14).

THE FIRST ONE IN. The procedure was precise: "whoever stepped in first, **after** the stirring of the water." NKJV **Only one was healed**, yet a multitude had gathered with each one hoping he would get into the water first. That is how strong hope is. It does not reckon on mere possibilities, or statistics. We will learn from this record that even if a person failed time and again to get into the

water first, yet he made it a point to be there hoping for the best.

Of course, all of this postulates that the people had witnessed the healing of those who got into the water first. Had there been no healing, the crowd would have eventually dissipated, for where there is no demonstration of Divine power, people will, at best, be hesitant to seek for it, and hope to receive it. The real people of God are a witness of what the power of God can do. It not only delivers people from this present evil world (Gal 1:4), but also, through the grace of God, effectively teaches them to reject *“ungodliness and worldly lusts,”* and *“live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world”* (Tit 2:11-12). Professing “Christians” who are still enslaved to sin, are like the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda. They may be at the right place, and even be there at the right time, but their spiritual impotence shouts out that they have not been healed. Such people are, in fact, a living contradiction of the Gospel Jesus announced at his home-town synagogue: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He hath anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He hath sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised”* (Luke 4:18). The church is not meant to be a portico where people who are still dominated by sin gather.

WHATSOEVER DISEASE HE HAD. The power of God is limitless. Jesus never did confront a disease or a demon-possessed person whom He could not heal. In this case, an angel troubled the waters, and *“whatsoever disease”* that person had was removed from him as soon as he stepped into the water. Further, the people who were at the pool of Bethesda were convinced this was true – *“impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered.”*

This is a marvelous depiction of salvation. The remedy for sin is gloriously thorough and effective. **There is no moral or spiritual condition that is not addressed and resolved by justification.** A new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 36:26) are a complete resolution to the condition caused by sin. In Christ’s miraculous ministry it was no more difficult to dismiss leprosy than it was a fever. Even so, it was no more difficult to convert an inquiring eunuch from Ethiopia, than it was to convert an aggressive persecutor of the church. You must understand that entire recovery programs have been put in place that classify sins, leading people to imagine that some are more difficult to overcome than others. The grace of God, love of God, and power of God, as dispensed in and through Jesus Christ, are limitless. Just as it was at the pool of Bethesda, those who are exposed to the power of God must believe that it can always thoroughly and effectively address their situation.