

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
5:1-15

1. After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2. Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. 3. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. 4. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and troubled the water; whoever then first, after the troubling of the water, stepped in was made well of whatever disease he had. 5. And a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. 6. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he said to him, Will you be made well? 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 steps down before me. 8. Jesus said to him, Rise, take up your bed and walk. 9. And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath. 10. The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, It is the sabbath day; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed. 11. He answered them, He who made me well said to me, Take up your bed and walk. 12. Then they asked him, Who is the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk? 13. And he who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place. 14. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, Behold, you are made well; sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you. 15. The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

1.--[*After this.*] Literally translated this would be "after these things." Some think that when St. John is telling some event which follows immediately after the last thing narrated, he uses the expression "after this thing" (as John ii.12), but that when there has been an interval of time, he uses the expression "after these things." If this be correct, we must suppose that some space of time elapsed between the healing of the nobleman's son and the visit to Jerusalem, recorded in this chapter.

[*A feast of the Jews.*] There is nothing to show what feast this was. Most commentators think it was the passover. Many, however, think it was the feast of pentecost. Some few say it was the feast of tabernacles, some the feast of purim, and some the feast of the dedication. Each view has its advocates, and the question will probably never be settled. An argument in favor of the passover is the fact that none of the five Jewish feasts were so regularly attended by devout Jews as the passover. An argument against it is the fact that on three other occasions, when the feast of the passover is mentioned in St. John, he carefully specifies it by name, and one would naturally expect that it would be named here.

The matter is really of no peculiar importance. In one point of view only

is it interesting. If the "feast" was the passover, it proves that there were four passovers during the period of our Lord's ministry on earth. St. John mentions three by name, beside this "feast." (John ii.23; vi.4; xii.1.) This would make it certain that our Lord's ministry lasted three full years, or at any rate must have begun with a passover and ended with a passover. If the "feast" was not the passover, we have no proof that His ministry lasted longer than between two and three years. (See notes on John ii.13.)

The expression, "a feast of the Jews," is one of many incidental evidences that St. John wrote specially for the use of Gentile converts, and that he thought it needful for their benefit to explain Jewish ordinances.

[*Jesus went up.*] The frequency of our Lord's attendance at Jewish feasts, and the respect He showed for Mosaic ordinances, should always be noticed. They were appointed by God, and so long as they lasted, He gave them honor. It is an important proof to us that the unworthiness of ministers is no reason for neglecting God's ordinances, such as baptism and the Lord's Supper. The benefit we receive from ordinances and sacraments does not depend on the character of those who administer them, but on the state of our own souls. The priests and officers of the Temple, in our Lord's time, were probably very unworthy persons. But that did not prevent our Lord honoring the Temple ordinances and feasts. It does not, however, follow from this that we should be justified in habitually going to hear false doctrine preached. Our Lord never did this.

Let it be noted that none of the four Gospel writers speak so much of our Lord's doings in Judæa and Jerusalem as St. John does.

2. [*There is in Jerusalem.*] These words, it is thought, show that Jerusalem was yet standing and not taken and destroyed by the Romans when John wrote his Gospel. Otherwise, it is argued, he would have said, "There was at Jerusalem."

[*By the sheep market a pool.*] Nothing certain is known about this pool or its precise situation. Modern travelers have professed to point out where it was. But there is little ground for determining the matter, except conjecture and tradition. After all the changes of eighteen centuries, points like these are almost incapable of a satisfactory solution. There is no place in the world, perhaps, where it is so difficult to settle anything decidedly about ancient buildings and sites as Jerusalem. Some propose to render the expression "sheep market" the "sheep gate," because of Nehemiah iii.1. But we really have no certain ground for either expression.

[*Called in Hebrew, Bethesda.*] The word "Bethesda," according to Cruden, means "house of effusion" or "house of pity or mercy." It is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. The mention of "in Hebrew" shows again that John did not write for Jews so much as Gentiles.

[*Having five porches.*] These porches were probably covered arcades, piazzas, colonnades, or verandas, open at one side to the air but protected against the sun or rain overhead. In a hot country like Palestine, such buildings are very necessary.

3.--[*In these lay a great multitude.*] The context seems to show that the multitude were assembled at this particular feast in this place, expecting a certain miracle to be wrought which only took place at this particular time of the year.

[*Impotent folk.*] This expression evidently does not mean paralytic people, but merely people who were sick and ill. The mention of "blind, lame, paralyzed," shows this.

[*Moving of the water.*] This "moving" must have been something that could be seen and observed by persons standing by or looking on. There was no virtue or healing element in the water until the movement took place.

4.--[*For an angel went down, etc.*] The thing we are here told is very curious. There is nothing like it in the Bible. Josephus, the Jewish writer, does not mention it. The simplest view is that it was a standing miracle wrought once every year, as Cyril says, or at any rate at some special season only, by God's appointment, to keep the Jews in mind of the wonderful works that had been done for them in time past, and to remind them that the God of miracles was unchanged. But when this singular miracle first began, on what occasion it began, why we never hear anything else about it, in what way the angel came down, are questions which cannot be answered. That angels did interpose in a miraculous manner in the days of the New Testament is perfectly clear from many instances in the Gospels and Acts. That the Jews themselves had strong faith in the interposition of angels on certain occasions is clear from the account of the vision of Zacharias, when we are simply told that the people "perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple." (Luke i.22.) That from the days of Malachi, when inspiration ceased, God may have seen it good to keep up in the Jewish mind a faith in unseen things by the grant of a standing miracle, is a very probable opinion. The wisest course is to take the passage as we find it and to believe though we cannot explain.

All other attempts to get over the difficulties of the passage are thoroughly unsatisfactory. To condemn the passage as not genuine is a lazy way of cutting the knot, and not at all clearly warranted by the authority of manuscripts. To say that St. John only used the popular language of the Jews in describing the miracle and did not really believe it himself is, to say the least, irreverent and profane. To suppose, as Hammond and others have done--that the "angel" only means a common human "messenger" sent by the priests and that the healing efficacy of the water arose from the blood of the many sacrifices which drained into the pool of Bethesda at the passover feast, or to suppose as do others--that Bethesda was a pool where sacrifices were washed before they were offered, are all entirely gratuitous assumptions and do not get over the main difficulty. There is no proof that the blood of the sacrifices did drain into the pool. There is no proof that the blood would give the water any healing virtue. There is no proof, as Lightfoot shows, that sacrifices were washed at all. (See

Lightfoot's Exercitations on John on this passage.) Moreover, this hypothesis would not account for only one person being healed every time the waters were "stirred up" or for St. John's mention of the "angel stirring up" the waters. Here, as in many other instances, the simplest view, and the one which involves the fewest difficulties, is to take the passage as we find it and to interpret it as narrating an actual fact: viz., a standing miracle which actually was literally wrought at a certain season and perhaps every year.

After all, there is no more real difficulty in the account before us than in the history of our Lord's temptation in the wilderness, the various cases of Satanic possession, or the release of Peter from prison by an angel. Once admit the existence of angels, their ministry on earth, and the possibility of their interposition to carry out God's designs, and there is nothing that ought to stumble us in the passage. The true secret of some of the objections to it is the modern tendency to regard all miracles as useless lumber which must be thrown overboard, if possible, and cast out of the Sacred Narrative on every occasion. Against this tendency we must watch and be on our guard.

Rollock remarks: "The Jewish people at this time was in a state of great confusion, and the presence of God was in great measure withdrawn from it. The prophets whom God had been accustomed to raise up for extraordinary purposes were no longer given to the Jews. Therefore God, that He might not appear altogether to cast off His people, was willing to heal some miraculously, and in an extraordinary way, in order that He might testify to the world that the nation was not yet entirely rejected." Brentius and Calvin say much the same.

Poole thinks that this miracle only began a little before the birth of Christ "as a figure of Him being about to come who was to be a Fountain opened to the house of David." Lightfoot takes the same view.

[*Troubled the water.*] This means, no doubt, "disturbed, agitated, stirred up," the water of the pool. There is no reason for supposing that the angel visibly appeared in doing this. It is enough to suppose that at a certain hour there was a sudden stir and agitation of the waters, immediately after which they possessed the miraculous virtue of healing, just as the waters at Marah became sweet immediately after Moses cast the tree into them. (Exod. xv.25.)

[*Whoever then first.*] This shows that the whole affair was miraculous. On no other supposition can we account for only one person being healed after the troubling of the water. That only "one" was healed is plain, I think from the wording of the passage.

[*Of whatever disease he had.*] These words would be more literally translated, "with whatsoever disease he was held."

Bengel thinks that the use of the past tense throughout this verse shows that the miracle had ceased when John wrote. He "used to go down," "used to trouble the waters," etc. Tertullian declares expressly that the miracle ceased from the time that the Jews rejected Christ.

5.--[*Infirmity thirty-eight years.*] This means the length of time during which the sick man had been ill. How old he was we do not know.

Baxter remarks, "How great a mercy is it to live eight and thirty years under God's wholesome discipline! O my God, I think Thee for the like discipline of eight and fifty years. How safe a life is this compared to one spent in full prosperity and pleasure!"

Those who see typical and abstruse meanings in all the least details of the narratives of Scripture observe that thirty-eight years was the exact time of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness. They see in the sick man (helpless and hopeless till Christ came) a type of the Jewish Church. The pool of Bethesda is Old Testament religion. The small benefit it conferred (only healing one at a time) represents the narrow and limited benefit which Judaism conferred on mankind. The merciful interference of Christ on the sick man's behalf represents the bringing in of the Gospel for all the world. These are pious thoughts, but it may well be doubted whether there is any warrant for them.

The notions that the pool of Bethesda was a type of baptism, and the five porches typical of the five books of the law or the five wounds of Christ, appear to me mere ingenious inventions of man without any solid foundation. Yet Chrysostom, Augustine, Theophylact, Euthymius, Burgon, Wordsworth, and many others maintain them. Those who wish to see a full reply to the theory that the miracle at the pool of Bethesda is a typical proof of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration will find it in Gomarus, the Dutch divine. He takes up Bellarmine's argument on the subject and answers him completely.

6.--[*When Jesus saw...knew...long time.*] We need not doubt that our Lord knew this man's history by that divine knowledge which, as God, He possesses of all things in heaven and earth. To suppose that He ascertained by inquiry the state of his case before speaking to him is a weak, meager, and frigid interpretation. As a practical truth, it is a most comfortable doctrine that Jesus knows every sickness and disease and all its weary history. Nothing is hid from Him.

[*He said to him.*] This is an example of our Lord being the first to speak and begin conversation, as He did with the woman of Samaria. (John iv.7.) Unasked, unsolicited, unexpectedly, He mercifully addressed the sick man. No doubt He always begins in man's heart before man begins with Him. But He does all things as a Sovereign, according to His own will; and it is not always that we see Him taking the first step so entirely of Himself as we do here.

[*Will you be made well?*] The English language here fails to give the full force of the Greek. It means, "Have you a will? Do you wish? Do you desire to be made well?" The question was perhaps meant to awaken desire and expectation in the man and to prepare him in some sense for the blessing about to be bestowed on him.

Is not this, to take a spiritual view, the very language that Christ is

continually addressing to every man and woman who hears His Gospel? He sees us in a wretched, miserable, sin-sick condition. The one thing He asks us is, "Have you any wish to be saved?"

7.--[*I have no man...put me into the pool.*] This is no doubt mentioned as an intentional proof of the heartlessness and unkindness of human nature. Think of a poor invalid waiting for years by the water and having not a single friend to help him! The longer we live on earth, the more we shall find that it is a selfish world, and that the sick and afflicted have few real friends in time of need. "The poor is hated even of his neighbor." (Prov. xiv.20.) Christ is the only unfailing friend of the friendless and helper of the helpless.

8.--[*Rise...walk.*] Here, as in other similar cases, it is evident that miraculous healing power went forth with the words of our Lord. Thus, "Stretch forth thy hand" (Mark iii.5); "Go show yourselves to the priests" (Luke xvii.14). Commands like these tested the faith and obedience of those to whom they were given. How could they possibly do the things commanded if impotent like the man before us? Where was the use of doing them if still covered with leprosy, like the ten lepers? But it was precisely in the act of obedience that the blessing came. The whole power is Christ's. But He loves to make us exert ourselves and show our obedience and faith.

Augustine finds in the command "Take up your bed" an exhortation to the love of our neighbors, because we are to bear one another's burdens; and in the command "Walk" an exhortation to love God! Such allegorizing appears to me very unwarrantable and calculated to bring the Bible into contempt as a book that can be made to mean anything.

9.--[*Immediately...made well...walked.*] Here we see the reality of the miracle wrought. Nothing but Divine power could enable one who had been a cripple for so many years to move his limbs and carry a burden all at once. But it was as easy to our Lord to give immediate strength as it was to create muscles, nerves, and sinews in the day that Adam was made.

When we are told that the man "took up his bed," we must remember that this probably was nothing more than a light mattress, carpet, or thick cloth such as is commonly used in hot countries for sleeping on.

10.--[*The Jews.*] Here, as in many places in St. John's Gospel, the expression, "the Jews," when used of the Jews at Jerusalem, means the leaders of the people--elders, rulers, and scribes. It does not mean vaguely the "Jewish crowd" around our Lord, but the representatives of the whole nation--the heads of Israel at the time.

[*It is not lawful...bed.*] In support of this charge of unlawfulness, the Jew would allege not merely the general law of the fourth commandment, but the special passages in Nehemiah and Jeremiah about "bearing no burden" on the Sabbath day. (Neh. xiii.19; Jer. xvii.21.) But they could not have proved that these passages applied to the case of the man before them. For a man to carry merchandise and wares on the Sabbath was one thing. For a sick man, suddenly and miraculously healed, to walk away to his home carrying his mattress, was quite another. To forbid the one man to carry his burden was Scriptural and lawful. To forbid the other was cruel and contrary to the spirit of the law of Moses. The act of the one man was unnecessary. The act of the other was an act of necessity and mercy. It might perhaps be urged, in defense of the Jews, that they only saw a man carrying off a burden and knew nothing of his previous illness or his cure. But when we remember the many instances recorded in the Gospels of their extreme and harsh interpretation of the fourth commandment, it is doubtful whether this plea will stand.

11.--[*He who made me well, etc.*] The answer of the man seems simple. But it contains a deep principle. "He who has done so great thing to me was surely to be obeyed when He told me to take up my bed. If He had authority and power to heal, He was not likely to lay upon me an unlawful command. I only obeyed Him who cured me." If Christ has really healed our souls, should not this be our feeling towards Him? "Thou hast healed me. What Thou commandest I will do."

12.--[*Who is the man...walk?*] Ecolampadius, Grotius, and many others, remark what an example this question is of the malevolent and malicious spirit of the Jews. Instead of asking "Who healed you?" they asked, "Who told you to carry your bed?" They cared not for knowing what they might admire as a work of mercy, but what they might make the ground of an accusation. How many are like them! They are always looking out for something to find fault with.

13.--[*Did not know who it was.*] It is most probable that the cripple really did not know not who it was who had healed him, and had only seen our Lord that day for the first time. He was ignorant of His name and only knew Him as a kind person, who came up and said suddenly, "Will you be made well?" and after curing him, miraculously, suddenly disappeared in the crowd.

[*Conveyed himself away.*] The Greek word so rendered is peculiar and only found in this place. Parkhurst thinks that it simply means "departed, or went away." Schleusner says that the root of the idea is "swimming out, or escaping by swimming," and that the meaning here is "withdrew himself secretly from the crowd that was in the place." If so, it is not improbable that, as in Luke iv.30 at Nazareth, and John x.39 in the Temple, our Lord put forth a miraculous power in passing or gliding through the crowd without being observed or stopped.

14.--[*Afterward...temple.*] It is not clear how long a time elapsed before our Lord found the man whom He had healed in the Temple. If the theory be correct to which I adverted in the note on the first verse, there must have been an interval. The word "afterward" is literally "after these things."

Chrysostom thinks that the circumstance of the man being found "in the temple" is an indication of his piety.

[*Behold you are made well; sin no more, etc.*] These words appear to point at something more than meets the eye. They are a solemn caution. One might fancy that our Lord knew that some sin had been the beginning of the man's illness, and that He meant to remind him of it. It certainly seems very unlikely that our Lord would say broadly and vaguely, "sin no more," unless He spoke with a significant reference to some sin which had been the primary cause of this man's long illness. (See 1 Cor. xi.30.) There are sins which bring their own punishments on men's bodies; and I am strongly disposed to think that it may have been the cause with this man. The expression "a worse thing" would then come out with more force. It would be "a heavier visitation," a worse judgment even than this thirty-eight years' illness. A sick bed is a sorrowful place, but hell is much worse.

Besser remarks: "It is a dreadful thing when the correction and mercy of Divine love wearies itself with a man in vain. You that are sick, write over your beds when you rise up from them in renewed health, 'Behold you are made well; sin no more lest a worse thing come unto you.'" Brentius says much the same.

If sin was the cause of this man's disease, and he had been ill from the effects of it thirty-eight years, it is plain that it must have been committed before our Lord was born! It is an instance, in that case, of our Lord's perfect and Divine knowledge of all things, past as well as future.

15.--[*Departed and told the Jews.*] There is no proof that the man did this with an evil design. Born a Jew and taught to reverence his rulers and elders, he naturally wished to give them the information they desired and had no reason to suppose, for anything we can see, that it would injure his Benefactor.