

### Third Sign - Jesus Works on the Wrong Day - John 5:1-21<sup>1</sup>

**Before the lesson** –I have “two” lesson plan options for this text. The first option is a “holy reading” (“Lexio Divina” in the Latin). I give full instructions below. By reading the Information session ahead of time, you can address issues or questions about the text as they come up in the debriefing times. This plan worked very well for me in my class of less than a dozen persons. If you’d rather do a more traditional method, skip the instructions for the Holy Reading. There are no handouts or audio/visual equipment needed for this lesson plan.

**Fellowship Question:** (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is the longest period of time that you were sick with an illness? (Not a disease, but an illness.)

When I am sick, I... (choose as many as fit you) a. Prefer to be alone b. Like for people to know I am ill c. Get crabby d. Always request prayers e. All of the above

#### Information

I will begin our Bible study today by reading the passage to you three times. There is a different goal for each reading. I will remind you of the goal before I begin that reading. The first time you hear the story, try to listen to it as if it is a new story to you. You may be familiar with it; even so, listen for what you never noticed. In the second reading, take the role of one of the characters in the story. How does this story play out from your character’s perspective? For the third reading, pay attention to what message the Holy Spirit has for you, today. What is your take away?

Let’s begin with a couple of deep breaths. Relax your body and mind. In this moment of silence, ask God to speak to you.

*[Read the passage (John 5:1-15) more slowly and meditatively than at a normal pace.*

*After the first reading, ask class members to itemize who the characters are in this story: Jesus, the sick man, the disciples, the onlookers who are also ill, the healthy onlookers, the Pharisees, etc.) Ask the class members to choose one to live this story through as you read it again. ]*

Let’s continue with a couple of deep breaths. Relax your body and mind. In this moment of silence, ask God to speak to you.

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

*[After the second reading, have a silent pause before asking class members to share insights from their character's perspective. This may be a time when the Information session materials may answer some questions and add additional perspective.]*

*Remind class members that for this third reading, they are to pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is saying to them. Is there something they are to do? Is an attitude change needed?]*

Let's continue with a couple of deep breaths. Relax your body and mind. In this moment of silence, ask God to speak to you.

*[Pause after the reading. Ask if anyone has anything they'd like to share from the third reading. After any or all have shared, close in a prayer.]*

[Traditional lesson plan:]

- Have a class member read John 5:1-9.

Take the age of your life and subtract 38 years. Think of what you would have missed if you had been severely ill for all that time. Think of what you would have missed, relationship-wise, if society had excluded you from normal life because of your illness.

Describe what your life would have been like as a paralytic person for 38 years.

“Thirty-eight years of sickness would indicate hopelessness from the physical standpoint: but there is a hint that the man was even more hopeless psychologically. He had become resigned to his fate and had accepted the inevitable....The paralysis of body was accompanied by a partial paralysis of will. Jesus' selection of this man from the large number of invalids at the pool indicated His interest in restoring those who have been reduced to utter hopelessness both in body and spirit.”<sup>2</sup>

In our previous story, the second “sign” in John's Gospel, the man who had power in the king's court made a twenty-mile journey to find Jesus. Apparently, he believed that God could work through Jesus to heal the man's sick child. His faith accompanied his desperation as he spoke with Jesus. Once Jesus said, “Your child is healed,” the man turned around and made his way home.

What are the similarities and differences between the men in these two healing stories?

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<sup>2</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief: An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), 104, 105.

“In this man there is no such faith as that of the king’s officer: on the contrary when Jesus tests the man’s will to gain health, which is one aspect of faith, the sick man’s only answer is a complaint.”<sup>3</sup> “the complaint of an embittered spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

“There is no indication that Jesus was relating the sin to the man’s crippled condition in a cause-and-effect sort of way. That was a standard thought in Jesus’ day, but on other occasions he absolutely rejected sin as a solution to the problem of physical calamity.

- Have a class member read John 9:1-3.

“It is entirely possible that the lame man had been blaming his crippled condition for those thirty-eight years on God and that his sin was bitterness, hostility toward God.”<sup>5</sup>

We can imagine the scene. A large pool. Many people were enjoying the pool. Others were on the edges asking for help, for money, for companionship. These days, we don’t even need to imagine what the setting looked like because in the 1940s, archaeologists found it and began unearthing it.

“In this [20th] century the pool described in John has been discovered and excavated in Jerusalem...The pool was trapezoidal in form, 165-220 feet wide by 315 feet long, divided by a central partition. There were colonnades on the four sides and on the partition - thus, John’s ‘five porticos.’”<sup>6</sup>

You may notice in modern translations that a verse (verse 8) is put into the footnotes. It was apparently added many years after the original texts were written and copied, because the story of the angel stirring the waters is not found in them. It is not a problem text - it does not contradict anything in the text. It merely helps later readers understand more of the context and why the man had not been healed by the waters in such a long time.

“Codex Alexandrinus and the later Greek manuscripts have a verse omitted by all the early witnesses...Tertulian (ca. A.D. 200) gives evidence of having known this verse; Chrysostom (ca. 400) is the first of the Greek writers to do so. That it is a gloss is indicated not only by the poor

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<sup>3</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John: Second Edition*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1999), 74.

<sup>4</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Themes (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989), 54.

<sup>5</sup> Ray Summers, *Behold the Lamb: An Exposition of the Theological Themes in the Gospel of John* (Nashville: Broadman, 1979), 89.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 207.

textual attestation, but also by the presence of seven non-Johannine words in one sentence. This ancient gloss, however, may well reflect a popular tradition about the pool.”<sup>7</sup>

As far as John is concerned, this is one of the seven “signs” that point to who Jesus is. The healing itself is almost incidental to the point that Jesus is doing good works on the wrong day, as far as the Pharisees were concerned.

“In this healing there is no prerequisite of faith. The miracle has another purpose: to clarify Jesus’ work.”<sup>8</sup>

- Have a class member read John 5:9b-13.

Commentators, for the most part, have harsh comments about the Pharisees in this story. For example,

“It is extraordinary that the healed paralytic had no idea of the identity of his benefactor - so little did he ‘believe’! It is equally extraordinary that the Jewish leaders had no regard for the healing of a man who had been crippled for almost a lifetime; their sole concern was for the breaking of a sabbath rule as defined in their tradition.”<sup>9</sup>

But, we must remember that the “keepers of the Law” had an important job - to keep the Jews as a Holy People. The Torah commanded that the people must rest on the holy day (Sabbath) because, in the Creation story, God completed the work of Creation, so God rested on the Sabbath. What does it mean to “rest” on the Sabbath? Many debates led to many rules.

“It is easy, of course, to dismiss the Jewish opposition to Jesus as blind and narrow. But protection of the Sabbath is a duty under the law given by God and is crucial for protecting the holiness of God among God’s people. Sabbath breaking is a serious offense. But more serious would be any attempt by a Jew to deny its requirement.”<sup>10</sup>

When Jesus was challenged by “the Jews,” what line of reasoning does Jesus use for why he felt it was appropriate for him to do work on the Sabbath?

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 207.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1988), 40.

<sup>9</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John: Second Edition*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1999), 74.

<sup>10</sup> Mark A. Matson, *John*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 37.

“Jesus does not justify his work on humanitarian grounds, as often in the Synoptics, but on grounds that reveal his authority. Despite the biblical statement that God rested from creative activity on the Sabbath, the later rabbis realized that God could not have ceased his providential maintenance of the universe on the Sabbath. Thus they admitted that God continued to work on the Sabbath giving life and rewarding good and punishing evil. Jesus’ answer may refer to this belief.”<sup>11</sup>

“Jesus justifies his work of healing on the Sabbath by calling the attention of ‘the Jews’ to the fact that they admitted that God worked on the Sabbath. That the implications of this argument were immediately apparent is witnessed by the violence of the reaction. For the Jews the Sabbath privilege was peculiar to God, and no one was equal to God (Exodus 25:11; Isaiah 46:5; Psalm 89:8). In claiming the right to work even as his Father worked, Jesus was claiming a divine prerogative.”<sup>12</sup>

“Jesus as Son of God does the works of God on the Sabbath.”<sup>13</sup>

- Have a class member read John 5:14-18.

“Jesus seems to be threatening another disease if the man should sin again. But if we recognize that in Mediterranean societies, ‘sin’ is a breach of interpersonal relations, there ceases to be a problem. For if sin is whatever destroys one’s relationship with the group, and if we note that this man was devoid of friends to put him in the pool, Jesus’ comment makes perfect sense. As a friendless outcast, the man was indeed a ‘sinner,’ an outsider unattached to a group... Given his age and the short life expectancies in antiquity, should the man repeat whatever disrupted his relationship with the group, he would indeed risk the worst of all fates: having no one to bury and remember him.”<sup>14</sup>

It may be that the “sin” of this man was not a sin that we think of first, a sin regarding the love or abuse of money, sex, or power. His sin may have been having a persona that drove people away from him, so that he had no close friends. Maybe it was bitterness, hatred, a critical spirit, constant complaints that no one did enough for him. There are some people whose attitudes and behaviors drain us. We may want to help them, but their behavior drives us away.

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Brown, *The Gospel of John*, 217.

<sup>13</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Themes, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 112.

Compare his situation with the story in Mark 2:1-12 of the paralyzed man whose four friends took him to Jesus' house, climbed the roof, removed the roof, and lowered their friend in front of Jesus. Both men were paralyzed. One had no friends or support persons. One had many.

“In the Synoptic Gospels, much of Jesus' public reputation derives from healing the sick. Terms for healing appear 25 times in Luke, 17 times in Matthew, and 8 times in Mark. By contrast, there are only three healing stories in the entire Gospel of John...[I]n John's story, Jesus' healings are not a flash point for anyone's reaction; rather the controversy centers on the 'work' entailed in the healings, whether done by the one healed or by Jesus. Nonetheless, these healings are three of the seven 'signs' that are central to John's story. The term *well* appears four times in the story of the man at the pool (vv. 6, 9, 11, 14), emphasizing Jesus' healing power.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Transformational Exercise**

At the beginning of this story. Jesus asks the paralytic man, “Do you want to be healed?”

Why would he (or any of us) not want to be healed?

This story gives us the opportunity to reflect on our own “illnesses.” None of us are whole, perfect persons. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23)

Once we confess that we are sick with Sin, we have a decision to make, as Jesus asks us, “Do you want to become healthy?”

For a few moments, let's sit with that question in silence. Imagine Jesus asking you, “Do you want to be made healthy?” Are there excuses that you make so that you do not have to become healthy? Are there barriers that you defend? Do you wish to become healthy? Will you tell Jesus that in this time of silent prayer?

Pause a minute for silent prayer

Before we end the prayer, think about this: who else do you know who needs to be made healthy? In silence, let's pray for others who need the spiritual healing that Jesus offers.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *God, this world of sin, disease, and war is not what you had planned. Forgive us for our contentment and complacency. Overcome our feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Fill us with your goodness, your wellness, and your desire that the world be made whole. Help us to be persons who give life to others rather than drain life from them. Be a healing presence through us. Amen.*

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<sup>15</sup> Malina , 113.

