

BEHOLDING CHRIST AT BETHESDA

John 5:1-16

29 June 2014

[Note: Preaching is a live event where God meets with His people, and that cannot be reproduced or duplicated. It is unique every time, and indispensable in the life of the Christian and the church. This is not a complete transcript; it is typically about 80% of the actual sermon. Some common abbreviations in these notes are: "NB" = *nota bene*, "note well" / "+" = an illustration / "→" = an application / "BTW" = By the way / "Cf." = cross-reference / "i.e." = In other words / "b/c" = because / "E.G." = for example.]

Turn to Mark 2. – Before we get back into John's Gospel today, I want to set the stage with a helpful parallel passage in Mark.

Historically the Jews had two favourite BADGES that they wore proudly, badges that they felt distinguished them from ALL other nations in the world: circumcision, and the Sabbath.

Observing the Sabbath became for them the source of endless legalism.

First, they would say, 'Well, which of the Ten Commandments IS longest & most detailed? The 4th Commandment about keeping the Sabbath.'

By the time of Christ, rabbinic regulations for Sabbath had become painfully minute, ridiculously petty and external. –

The Jerusalem Talmud devotes *23 chapters* to Sabbath restrictions! – One Rabbi supposedly spent 2.5 yrs. just studying one of those chapters! – The only way to avoid breaking the countless Sabbath laws was to get a Ph.D. in Sabbath-keeping!

Rabbinic law listed 39 categories of things you could not do on a Sabbath, with 6 sub-categories under each of those = 234 sections of Sabbath regulations. – For example:

You could not take a hot bath because the vapours might have a cleansing effect on the floor! – You could not lift a stone, but could lift your child, even if he was holding a stone. –

If your house was on fire, you were only allowed to fetch certain things. – You could not tie or loosen knots; you could not sew more than one stitch, or write more than one letter.

If a bone came out of joint, you could not reset it (hope it occurs LATE in the Sabbath, otherwise you're in for major pain!). – (Don't you just wish you were a Jew at that time?)

PENALTY for intentionally breaking even one Sabbath law?– Capital offence, death by stoning.

Do you catch the outrageous IRONY here?! – They made all these laws to honour and observe a day given for rest, refreshment, and worshipping God. – Yet these laws only burdened people and made them more restless and anxious instead.

Watch now what Jesus does here in Mark 2, against this backdrop of the Jew's Sabbath-olatry & legalism. – Mark gives us two of Jesus' consecutive, back-to-back Sabbath confrontations:

(a) Read 2:23-28...

→ Jesus confronts their dead rituals, their traditionalism, their institutionalism, their self-righteous legalism –

He confronts it head on with the only thing that can cure us of this virus: *the authority of Christ & His Word*. – Repeat 2:28...

(b) Then Jesus drives home this point further: 3:1-6...

Only one man could ever say & DO such things: One who is Lord of the Sabbath, i.e., the very Maker & Originator of the Sabbath in the first place! – One Who is the very Son of God, the God-man, Jesus.

Now back to John's Gospel, chp. 5. – With that Sabbath backdrop from Mk. 2 in our minds, we will better grasp the message of John 5.

NB, John's first two major signs of Jesus were more private – water to wine behind the scenes at a wedding, and (last wk), an invisible, remote-control healing of the royal official's son (from a distance). –

Now comes the 3rd sign that John chooses for proving that Jesus is God and that you must believe in Him (20:31). – And this sign is much more public, and so it receives a more public reaction as a result.

None of the other 3 Gospels records this stunning healing – only John.

Stand, Read (vv. 1-18) & Pray: ...again showing us Christ & showing us ourselves; make this school hall another Bethesda pool where a host of human needs are all met by one mighty Saviour...

Give title...

****TWO ASPECTS of the Bethesda healing that show us the saving power of God's Son and the damning power of dead religion:***

→ You cannot have both – knowing Christ, and following dead religion. – You must choose. – In this story, Jesus forces a decision: He calls the Jewish leaders to decide – will they worship Jesus, the God-man, or their empty rituals? –

He calls the lame man to decide: Will he keep sinning, or will he follow Christ? – He calls you to decide: Will you let the power of God's Son save you, or the power of dead religion damn you?

1. vv. 1-9, The CURE – showing us the saving power of God's Son

v. 1 – John does not identify which Jewish feast it was – could've been Passover, Pentecost, or Tabernacles. – But we do know that Jerusalem was buzzing, crowded with worshippers from across the land.

v. 2a – Nehemiah mentions this same gate in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Sheep Gate. – It’s a small opening in the northeast wall of the city, not far from the temple mount.

Bethesda = Hebr. for “house of outpouring/mercy” – How appropriate for what Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was about to do for one person in desperate need of mercy.

v. 2b – Two large pools (think Olympic size) side by side. – With four long colonnades (porticoes, covered walkways) on each side, and one in the middle, dividing the two pools.
–

+ Today it is near the Church of St. Anne’s (been there!) – And there are remains of a Crusader church in medieval times built over the pools. – And it has a faded mural depicting an angel arising out of the pool. – Sound familiar?...

v. 3a – Remember, this is a hot, dry Mediterranean climate. – Under the shelter of these vast colonnades, the sick could find some solace. – Probably a good place to beg also, as these pools received many visitors.

+ Do NOT picture here people neatly dressed, sitting in wheelchairs, brought by friends or family, like on TV.

Oh no: These would’ve been outcasts and beggars, filthy and smelly, wearing rags, sprawled out all over the place. – Some can’t see, some can’t walk, some can’t move. – A pitiful site in the extreme. –

A bit like the vast waiting room in a Baragwana or Helen Joseph hospital. – This image of all the misery and brokenness caused by the Fall, all the agony that sin and the curse have brought to humanity.

Picture this pathetic, heart-wrenching place: v. 3a...

All of them there, all of them waiting, hoping, longing for their healing.

vv. 3b-4 – The best & earliest, most ancient manuscripts do not include this section. – It’s clear that this was added by later scribes, in an effort to explain the man’s remarks in v. 7, as to why all these people were gathered at this pool and spoke about some stirring.

Thankfully, there are thousands of Greek manuscripts & fragments available to us today. – The way we arrive at our amazingly reliable Greek and Hebrew and English versions is that these texts are carefully compared with each other, so that when some manuscripts have different wording, we can tell *almost always* tell which is original.

With further research and better Bible translations in the past 100+ years, it has become clear that vv. 3b-4 here aren’t in the original. –

Also, the language here doesn’t fit the rest of John. – NOR does this sort of miracle fit any of the other miracles in the Bible – where God offers healing to the most pushy, rude person who can stampede over others in order to get it first!

OK, so WHY THEN were all the sick there? – Answer: Why do Hindus flock by the millions to the River Ganges every year? – Why have people flocked to the hot springs in Bath, England for centuries?

Why do the ZCC bring all their sick to Mt. Moriah every Easter? – Why does Pastor Chris or Benny Hinn still pack out the Dome and the stadiums every time they come? –

Sick people are desperate, and will grasp for any cure.

Studies show that Bethesda was a spring-fed pool, so there may have been occasional stirrings in the water. – We're also told that Bethesda pool waters were red with minerals, thought to have medicinal value. –

Some of the sick might have been truly helped by these waters. – Many might have just kept clinging to superstition and false hopes, as was common in the ancient world and is still rife today. –

We don't know what drew them all there; but we know they were there, v. 3a, "a multitude".

v. 5 – This lame man was no stranger to Jerusalem. – For nearly 4 decades he had been known for his severe disability. – Imagine: Being crippled, not for a day or week or month, not for a year or two of recovery, but for 38 years, paralysed. –

Rejected, ignored, forgotten by society. – Probably no wife, no kids, no family left to care for him, esp. in light of what he says in v. 7 about no one to help him.

v. 6a – Unlike other miracles where the sick reached out to Jesus, this time it is Jesus alone who does the reaching. – His sovereign grace, His mighty compassion, elects & pursues one pitiful sick man from out of the masses.

NB, v. 6b, not so much "learned" (NIV), but literally, Jesus "knew" this man's condition. – As John keeps showing us, Jesus is the omniscient, all-knowing, all-seeing Son of God (1:47-48; 2:23-25; 4:17).

*Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God.
He, to rescue me from danger,
Interposed His precious blood.*

v. 6c – What an odd question to ask a sick man!?!...

NOT when you recall that some beggars would lose a good living if they got cured. Some homeless return to the streets even after being offered shelter. –

Some prisoners grow accustomed to their chains and prison life. – If bondage is all you've ever known, freedom might scare you. This was how permanent & pathetic this man's situation was.

Repeat: v. 6c – KJV, "Wilt thou be made whole?"

→To my lost friend here today: HOW can you ever be helped by Jesus if you are still denying your need? – The woman at the well had at least to come and say, "Sir, give me this water to drink." (4:15) –

This is God's only condition for salvation, the only qualification required – to recognise that you are unqualified, to admit your great need!

Before you are saved, Jesus sees you in your wretched, sin-sick, miserable condition. – He knows that you are a withered soul in desperate need and in grave danger of eternal Hell & everlasting misery.

So the Lord Jesus asks you, 'Do you realise you need to be saved? Are you tired of your sin (after 38 yrs. of false hope, frustration & disappointment)? Have you come to the end of yourself? (v. 6d) "Do you want to be healed?"'

'Lost person, do you accept the Bible's diagnosis of you – that you are helpless and hopeless outside of Christ, that you are an enemy of God?' (Rom. 5:6-10; Eph. 2, etc.)

Through His Word, God says to you, 'Are you done trying to save yourself? Are you ready to let Me save you instead?'

As Jesus says elsewhere, 'I did not come to call the healthy, but the sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.' (Lk. 19:10, etc.)

Repeat: v. 6d...

v. 7 – What a tragic life. – Not a single friend to help him. – Surrounded by other selfish people who look out only for themselves, climbing over one another in the process (v. 7d).

I.e. he is saying to Jesus, 'I need a lift! If someone could just get me into those magical waters, I'd be healed.' – He sees no prospect of any other kind of miracle or hope for him. – He has no idea Who he is actually speaking to, as v. 13 further reveals.

No sign here of true repentance & faith. – Just a desire to use Jesus to fix the man's problem. – Sounds like he's reaching for excuses to explain why he is still lame. – He sees no hope of any other kind of miracle except that

v. 8 – I.e., 'Carry that thing which for so long has carried you! Start using those legs that have been so useless.'

+ This is reminiscent of what Jesus tells the paralytic in Capernaum after his 4 friends lower him through the roof. – Turn there & read: Mark 2:9-12...

→HOW can you just tell a lame man to get up? – That's like commanding a blind man to see, or a deaf man to hear! – How could Jesus command the impossible? –

In the same way that Scripture says dead sinners must believe in Christ, that lost people must repent & believe? – How, if they are dead in sin and deaf & blind to Christ? –

Answer: With the command comes the power to fulfil it. – The ability was not *inside* this lame man or his legs. – Never, he was powerless & helpless! – Rather, the ability & power came in Jesus' own word.

Christ's word spoke the world into existence. – His word created the nation of Israel.
– Christ's Word birthed His Church at Pentecost. – And Christ's Word has no less creating power today!

As we just saw last week: 4:50...

Heb. 4:12a; Rom. 10:17; Jam. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23....

~ Augustine, 'Lord, command what You will, and will what You command.'

And so it was on that day by the Bethesda pool:

v. 9 – 'Who is He, that carries cures in His mouth? Sickness flees at His voice. His word puts legs on the lame man!'

+ What a contrast to one of today's most popular heresies, the Word-Faith movement that teaches a false doctrine of Positive Confession, of 'name it & claim it'. –

This prosperity theology is propagated today by the likes of Kenneth Copeland, T.D. Jakes, Fred Price, Creflo Dollar, and Joyce Meyer, and Joel Osteen.

In Osteen's best-selling book, *Your Best Life Now*, he writes: "Friend, there is a miracle in your mouth. If you want to change your world, start by changing your words." –

If you are struggling, Osteen says you must boldly declare, "Everything I put my hands to prospers and succeeds!" Friend, when you make those kinds of bold declarations, all heaven comes to attention...." (I would agree, when you start naming it & claiming it, Heaven is alerted, and Heaven is *alarmed* at such arrogance and pride and error. Who do you think you are?!)

COMPARE the Word-faith doctrine with Scripture: My words & your words have NO power to create or save. – My faith is no force and has no ability in itself. – MY words accomplish nothing of eternal value.

It is Jesus' word that has power! – He speaks, and a universe is created! (Jn. 1:3; Gen. 1:3ff; Ps. 33:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; 11:3, etc.). – He speaks, and the sick are cured, the lame walk, the blind see, the deaf hear, the mute speak. –

Christ speaks, and the leper is cleansed, the demons flee, and the demoniac is set free. – Christ speaks, and waves are stilled, and dead are raised.

Best, and greatest of all – Christ speaks, and dead sinners are made alive! (Eph. 2:1ff) – That's my testimony, and yours!...

→CONTRAST here biblical healings with today's fake healings. – Note FOUR MARKS here of biblical healings (as seen already in Mark 2, the man with the withered hand): (a) *immediate*, (b) *verifiable*, (c) *complete*, and (d) *authenticating a true message*.

(a) IMMEDIATE: NB, v. 9, the healed man was NOT just staggering & wobbling away, supported & aided by helpers, wondering, 'Was that a healing?' (like on TV) – Nor did he need weeks of physio or rehab! Nothing required to restore muscle tone after 38 years of non-use! – All restored, instantly!

Biblical healings, true healings, are immediate: “at once” (NIV). –

(b) Biblical miracles are also *verifiable and indisputable*. – Everyone in town knew this man had been lame for 38 yrs, a known fact. – He was not just some stranger who showed up complaining of headache or backache, or seated in a wheelchair and you just had to take his word for it.

No: ALL could see how sick he’d been. – And now ALL could see how healed he was!: v. 9...

Same with the leper Jesus healed in Mk. 1, or the paralytic lowered in Mark 2, or the Gerasene demoniac, or the bleeding woman in Mark 5. – Same with Lazarus who was raised (Jn. 11); or when Peter healed the lame man at Beautiful Gate, Acts 3, et. al. –

ALL of these healings were *immediate & verifiable*.

(c) Biblical healings are *complete*, not partial. – They were always 100% successful, fully accomplished, never incomplete, zero failures, ever. –

What a contrast to a liar like Benny Hinn, who admitted in a 2009 TV program that he does not have medical verification for his healings. – Hinn also now admits that God doesn’t heal everyone.

A blind 9-year old pronounced healed by Hinn is now 17 and still legally blind. – Four seriously ill patients at Kenyan hospital were released from the hospital to attend a Hinn crusade. – All four of them died at the crusade.

(d) Biblical healings *authenticate a true message*:

Most important question re: biblical healings – WHAT was their PURPOSE? – Never just to improve quality of life, take away pain, or give health & wealth & prosperity. –

There was always a bigger, much bigger purpose – NOT a man-centred one, but a God-centred one! –

WHY did Jesus heal this lame man here at Bethesda’s pool, in front of everyone? – Turn & read Isa. 35:4-6...

What then was Jesus saying by this healing? – ‘The last days have come, the days of ancient prophesy being fulfilled, of God’s kingdom drawing near. And best of all, Messiah has come. I am He! God is here, He has come to save you!’

Never were biblical signs an end in themselves. – They were “signs” (4:54), they pointed to something beyond itself.

SUMMARY – FOUR MARKS here of biblical healings:

(a) immediate, (b) verifiable, (c) complete, and (d) authenticating a true message. –

TRUE all over the Gospels, true throughout Acts, true in church history.

NOT TRUE of any supposed faith healers or miracle workers today. – None of them match up to these biblical criteria. –

They are false saviours. – Christ alone is true, the world's only Saviour – our Saviour!

→Lingering question here: WHY didn't Jesus heal everyone there?...

Answer: That's not why He came. – It IS what He will do one day when He returns, for all His own (incl. any on that day who got saved), cf. v. 29 upcoming!...

But it's not why He came. – He came to save sinners. – He did ONE miracle on that day, to prove a greater point, to teach a greater lesson, to point to a greater healing & more lasting, permanent remedy – eternal life!.... Jn. 1:29...

→Signs & wonders can never produce this salvation – as we're about to see in this healed man....

~ As one preacher puts it: *Signs and wonders are something like illegal "drugs"—they may produce a spectacular effect at the beginning, but as time goes on, there is a demand for more and more. Signs and wonders have a diminishing effect. They are not wrong, for John uses them in this Gospel to convince his readers that Jesus is the Messiah, so that men and women might believe in His name and obtain the gift of eternal life.* –

But they are inadequate, and unnecessary for salvation. – Praise God for the saving power that is found only in His Son, for all who believe, any who believe!...

2. vv. 10-16, The CONFRONTATION – showing us the *damning power of dead religion*

What is dead religion? – We've all seen it. – Maybe you are still in it, even in this church? – Dead religion is doing church without Jesus, worship without love, morality without faith, tradition without any gospel, serving self but using God's name.

Islam is 100% dead religion. – So is every other false religion. But most deadly of all is when Christianity becomes dead religion, becomes church-ianity, becomes a Christless form of Christianity.

v. 10 – Saying to him, 'Praise God, he is healed! Dear brother, after 38 yrs, at last, you can walk!?'?... – Nope. –

Instead, 'Hey you, carrying that mat, you broke the rules. Don't you check the calendar before you decide to get healed and go for a walk? How dare you carry that pallet on the Sabbath. Get back down on the floor and be lame again, you law breaker.'

Talk about missing the obvious! – Isn't legalism ridiculous? – It stinks to high heaven.

→And there's a Pharisee inside of each of us that we must keep confronting & repenting of! – The damning power of false religion will damn us all if we let it. -

Unless God opens our eyes to who Christ truly is, we can spend our lives being religious but never knowing Jesus.

v. 11 – I.e., ‘This healing wasn’t my idea, blame Him!’ – Talk about ingratitude! – Pointing the finger at the One who just healed you! – Just trying to duck the authorities and save his own neck, instead of glorifying God for such a miracle.

vv. 12-13 – Jesus wanted to avoid mass hysteria, a stampede of all the other disabled people there (cf. 6:15).

NB, v. 13, this selfish man didn’t even bother to learn his Healer’s name. – Here he was, chosen out of the whole crowd to be the only one healed. – Yet it’s not even worth the effort to learn that it is Jesus?!

Opposite to the woman at the well, back in chp. 4: She wanted to know who Jesus was, and wanted others to know Him too: “Come & see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?” (4:29)

→BTW, here’s a 5th mark of biblical healings, in contrast to today’s fake healings: Biblical healings are *not always* linked to personal faith. – NOT everyone Jesus or the apostles’ healed got healed because they had faith. – There are numerous exceptions. (Lk. 17:11-19, 9 of the 10 lepers; the demoniacs in Matt. 8 & Mk. 1; Jn. 9:1ff; Jn. 11, Lazarus; Matt. 9:35; 11:2-5; 12:15-21; 14:13-14,34-36; 15:29-31; 19:2; Acts 3:6-8, beggar at Beautiful gate; Acts 16, demonised slave girl, etc.)

Contrary to what the Word-faith movmt teaches, Jesus was *not limited by a person’s lack of faith*. – Sometimes, Jesus healed complete unbelievers. – Even here, in vv. 6-7, when the man had the perfect chance to show that he had faith, instead he gives a dodgy answer, v. 7.

Because the main point was not about man’s faith, but about Jesus’ deity, demonstrating that He alone is Messiah, Son of God.

v. 14 – NB again, Jesus the Seeker, Jesus the One who pursues him & tracks him down.

Here is WHY Jesus chose this crippled man, out of all the sick multitude on that day: Not to heal his body, but to heal his soul. –

Not to give him new legs, but a new heart. – Jesus didn’t just want to see him start walking; he wanted this man to “stop sinning”. It was a healing for the sake of holiness, not just health.

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free
His blood can make the foulest clean
His blood availed for me!*

→Beware: You can experience an incredible miracle, but still end up in Hell! – Millions are still on the broad road that leads to destruction, claiming they got their healing, but they never got saved.

Remember those terrible words in Matt. 7: *Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles? And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'*

v. 15 – From bad to worse, now ratting on Jesus, betraying Him by leaking out His name to the authorities. – He knew already (vv. 11-13) that they were after Jesus, yet still he gives Him away. – Says on commentator, “This has to be the most startling act of ingratitude and unbelief in all the healings that Jesus did.” (MacArthur)

→ This healed man picked sides – the wrong side – Jesus’ enemies instead of Jesus. – Who’s side are you on? – Have you made that clear to all around?...

CONCL. – Repeat points...

→ Have you been with us today to Bethesda’s pool? – Have you met with the Saviour? – Have you beheld Christ?....

And have you seen yourself for who you truly are?....

And have you made your choice: What will it be for you – the saving power of Christ, or the damning power of false religion?...

PRAY