The Pool of Bethesda

A Sign to Israel — John 5:1-18

Understanding Jesus' Ministry: The Keys to the Gospels

The Scene at the Pool

This is Jesus' second recorded visit to Jerusalem in John's account. The first ended at the temple, where He drove out the money changers and was met with a demand: "What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?" (John 2:18). His answer was the sign of His own death and resurrection, and the men standing in front of Him didn't understand a word of it.

Time has passed since then. Two signs have been given, both in Galilee: water turned to wine at Cana, and a nobleman's son healed at a distance, without Jesus ever going to the house (John 2:11; 4:54). Now a feast brings Him back to the city that had asked for a sign, and this time He gives Jerusalem one it can't miss. A man who has not walked in thirty-eight years stands up and carries his bed through the streets on the Sabbath.

The kingdom is still being offered to the nation at this point in the ministry, and the leaders have not yet set out to kill Him. That decision is made in this chapter, over this man.

John 5:1-9

> After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me." Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your bed and walk." And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath.

John 5:10-15

> The Jews therefore said to him who was cured, "It is the Sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your bed." He answered them, "He who made me well said to me, 'Take up your bed and walk.'" Then they asked him, "Who is the Man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?" But the one who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, a multitude being in that place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

John 5:16-18

> For this reason the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, "My Father has been working until now, and I

> have been working." Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

The Difficulties on the Surface

Several things in this account sit uneasily on a first reading.

The healing at this pool works outside anything else Scripture describes. In the Gospels, healing comes from Jesus or from those He specifically authorized to do it (Matt. 10:1, 8). Here is a pool with a healing of its own, on a schedule no one controls, available to no one in particular.

The terms of it are stranger still. One person per stirring is made well, and only the one who reaches the water first. A great multitude lies in those porches, and everyone who loses that race stays exactly as he was, some of them for decades. Then Jesus arrives at this place crowded with sick people, heals a single man, and leaves.

Read flat, as a piece of reporting, the scene can look like a God with little compassion — a crowd left at the edge of the water year after year, and one man singled out at the end of it. But the subject of the account is the healing, not the pool, and John records it among the signs Jesus did (John 6:2; 20:30-31). A sign is read for what it points to, so the account has two layers, and each one needs its own attention. The first is the literal layer: there really was a pool by the Sheep Gate, a man really had been lying beside it for thirty-eight years, and Jesus really did walk up to him and heal him. The second is the picture that history was recorded to paint — what the healing of one man, in that place and on that day, was meant to show the nation he belonged to. Read that way, every one of those difficulties becomes part of what is being shown.

What Is Known About the Pool

The name Bethesda is generally taken to mean "house of mercy," and the pool sat "by the Sheep Gate" (John 5:2). It is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture, so there's no other biblical description to set beside John's. The Sheep Gate itself appears only in Nehemiah, as the first gate rebuilt when the wall of Jerusalem was restored after the exile (Neh. 3:1). It stood on the north side of the city near the temple, and it was the gate the sacrificial animals were brought through. Outside Scripture, excavations north of the temple area have uncovered a large double pool with colonnades around it, which most scholars identify with Bethesda.

John also leaves the feast unnamed. He simply writes "a feast of the Jews" (John 5:1), which is unusual for him; elsewhere he names them — Passover (2:13; 6:4; 11:55), Tabernacles (7:2), Dedication (10:22). Commentators have proposed nearly every option. What John did record is the day: it was a Sabbath (5:9), and that's the detail he builds on.

Then there is the angel. Verse 4 says an angel went down at a certain time and stirred the water, and whoever stepped in first was made well. The NKJV keeps that verse, along with the last clause of verse 3, in the running text, as the King James does, since both follow the manuscript tradition that carries them. Most modern versions bracket them or move them to a footnote, because they are missing from the oldest surviving manuscripts. Nothing like it is described anywhere else in Scripture.

If it is an accurate record of angelic activity, it would not be entirely out of line with other things the Gospels report. Jesus Himself pointed to exorcisms done by others: "And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Matt. 12:27). Some kind of supernatural activity with the appearance of being from God was already going on before His signs began; whether those exorcisms were legitimate, the text doesn't say. And the water may need no supernatural explanation at all. Set verses 3b-4 aside, and the sick man in verse 7 describes nothing more than water stirring and men racing for it. Springs have long been thought to heal — Calistoga, California, is known for it — and that would be natural, not supernatural.

There is also a reason for caution. From the close of Malachi to the opening of the Gospels, close to four hundred years went by with no recorded word from God to His people. When He spoke again, He sent an angel to Zacharias and Elizabeth (Luke 1:11-19), and their names read as one sentence: Zacharias means "God remembers," and Elizabeth means "God of the oath." God was picking up exactly where He had left off, remembering "the oath which He swore to our father Abraham" (Luke 1:73). If the stirring was as long-standing as the crowd in those porches suggests, it would have begun in that silence, with no word from God to account for it. At the same time, angelic activity of every kind, good and bad, rises sharply with the coming of Messiah (Luke 2:13; Mark 1:23-24), because a change in the administration of the heavens was drawing near (Heb. 2:5). Angelic activity tied to the healing of men in that window would not be unheard of.

The account does not need any of this settled, because the sick man's own words show what the people at the pool believed: "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me" (John 5:7). Whether an angel stirred the water or the crowd only believed one did, everyone in those porches was arranged around that belief. And the man never once got into the pool. Jesus healed him where he lay.

Why John Recorded It

John states his purpose for every sign in his book:

John 20:30-31

> And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Read quickly, that sentence can sound like a general appeal to anyone anywhere to come to God. Read for what it says, it's far more specific. "Christ" is not a second name; it's the Greek word for the Hebrew "Messiah," the Anointed One, the title Israel had been waiting on for centuries (Ps. 2:2; Dan. 9:25). What John says he wrote for is a matter of identity: that his readers would believe this Man is the One the nation had been promised.

He had been showing it from his opening chapters. The first sign comes at Cana: "This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11). At the Passover in Jerusalem many believed in His name "when they saw the signs which He did" (John 2:23). Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came by night and said, "no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (John 3:2). And to the nobleman from Capernaum Jesus said, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe" (John 4:48).

Four times before chapter five, a sign is given and a judgment about who He is follows it. Every one of those scenes involves Jews — disciples at a wedding in Galilee, a Passover crowd in Jerusalem, a ruler who came by night, a nobleman whose son was dying. That is no accident. Signs belonged to one particular people:

1 Corinthians 1:22

> For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom.

The word John uses is *semeion*, a sign. "Miracle" is what most people call the supernatural actions recorded in Scripture, but it puts the weight on the wonder. The Old Testament speaks of God's "wonders" (*pala*), and the New of "mighty works" (*dunamis*) and "signs" (*semeion*). A sign is a pointer. It exists to make a person look at something else, and what John's signs point to is a nation's King and the kingdom offered through Him.

The nation they were presented to already belonged to God. Israel was His firstborn son among the nations (Ex. 4:22), a people whose sins were covered by a sacrificial system He had commanded (Lev. 17:11) — a system still standing while Jesus walked among them, which is why He sent a healed leper straight to the priest with the offering Moses commanded (Luke 5:14). The people lying in those porches were not strangers to God waiting to be told how to obtain a standing before Him. They had one. What the nation lacked was the thing the prophets had called her to for centuries: to turn back to the LORD and walk with Him (Jer. 3:12-14; Hos. 14:1). She was His, and she was sick. That's why John the Baptist and Jesus preached the same call to repent (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Had the nation turned and received her King, restoration would have come with Him, and the life John promises to those who believe would have been the life of the kingdom (John 20:31).

What the Sign Points To

Nearly every detail in the account points at something: the day, the city, the gate, the water, the number of years, and the man himself.

The Sabbath

This sign was performed on the Sabbath (John 5:9), as was the healing of the man born blind (John 9:14) — the two Sabbath signs in John's Gospel. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record many more. Jesus taught in the synagogues on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16), cast out a demon and healed Peter's mother-in-law on one (Mark 1:21-31), defended His disciples for plucking grain on one (Matt. 12:1-8), restored a withered hand on one (Mark 3:1-6), loosed a woman bent over for eighteen years on one (Luke 13:10-17), and healed a man with dropsy at a Pharisee's table on one (Luke 14:1-6). It runs through the whole ministry, and He said what it meant: "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:8).

The Sabbath was a literal day, with literal rest from literal labor, and it was also a picture. That's how God taught this nation from the start: visible things carrying invisible ones. A lamb really died, and really pointed to a Lamb (John 1:29). A tabernacle was really pitched, and really patterned a heavenly one (Heb. 8:5). God had given the Sabbath to that nation, and to no other, as a sign:

Exodus 31:13, 16-17

> "Speak also to the children of Israel, saying: 'Surely My Sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.' . . . Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to observe the Sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel forever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed."

Three things are said there. The Sabbath is a sign. It's a sign between God and Israel, and no one else is named in it. And the reason given reaches back to the six days and the seventh at the beginning (Gen. 2:2-3).

That last clause opens the day up. The pattern God set in Genesis — six days of labor, then one of rest — is the pattern He laid over time itself, a thousand years answering to a day: "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8). Six thousand years of man's work under the curse, and then a seventh: the thousand-year kingdom. Every seventh day Israel kept was a weekly rehearsal of a seventh day she had not yet reached.

So the healing at this pool points to the healing Israel will receive on that coming seventh day, when the rest and the kingdom arrive. On the day God had appointed as the sign of His covenant with Israel, Jesus performed a sign to Israel. He put the pointer on the day that was already a pointer.

A Man of Israel, a Long Time in That Condition

The man is Jewish, lying in Jerusalem, and Jesus "knew that he already had been in that condition a long time" (John 5:6). Isaiah had described the nation the same way:

Isaiah 1:5-6

> Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, And the whole heart faints. From the sole of the foot even to the head, There is no soundness in it, But wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; They have not been closed or bound up, Or soothed with ointment.

That is a body no one has tended — head to foot, nothing sound, nothing closed or bound up. The man could not heal himself, and neither could the nation.

Jerusalem, and a Gate

This happened in Jerusalem, at a gate. Jerusalem is the city from which Israel is to rule the nations (Isa. 2:3), and in Scripture the gate is where government sits; the elders judged there (Deut. 21:19; Ruth 4:1-2). Israel will one day rule from Jerusalem, and Abraham's descendants will "possess the gate of their enemies" (Gen. 22:17). The sign was given at the place where the nation's rule will one day be exercised, to a man who could not stand up.

Thirty-Eight Years

John gives the length of the man's infirmity exactly: thirty-eight years (John 5:5). Israel's history has a thirty-eight-year span of its own, and it began on the worst day of the wilderness.

Most people think of the wilderness as forty years, and that number is right (Num. 14:34). But Moses breaks the forty into two parts. The first part was the nearly two years it took to reach Kadesh Barnea, at the edge of the land God had promised, as the nation was taught and led there (Num. 10:11-12). Then came Kadesh. Twelve spies went in, and ten came back saying the land could not be taken (Num. 13:31). The congregation wept all night, turned on Moses and Aaron, and said out loud what the whole crisis was about: "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt" (Num. 14:4). These were men who had watched the plagues, walked through the sea, stood at the mountain, and eaten bread off the ground every morning, and standing at the border of the thing all of it had been for, they voted to go back. God's answer was that not one of that generation would see the land He had sworn to their fathers (Num. 14:22-23). The next morning, with the sentence already passed, they tried to take it anyway and were beaten back down the mountain (Num. 14:40-45).

From Kadesh Barnea to the day the second generation reached the edge of the land, Moses gives an exact figure:

Deuteronomy 2:14

> And the time we took to come from Kadesh Barnea until we crossed over the Valley of the Zered was thirty-eight years, until all the generation of the men of war was consumed from the midst of the camp, just as the LORD had sworn to them.

Scripture never lets that day go. Moses retells it (Deut. 1:26-36), and the psalmist sings it: "For forty years I was grieved with that generation . . . So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest'" (Ps. 95:10-11). Paul sets that whole generation before the Corinthians — all under the cloud, all through the sea, all eating the same spiritual food and drinking from the Rock that was Christ, and their bodies still scattered in the wilderness — and says those things "were written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:1-11). Hebrews names the cause in one line: "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:19).

Those thirty-eight years were not spent outside the covenant. They were spent by a redeemed people, brought out by the blood of the lamb (Ex. 12:13), who could not enter what had been promised to them. That is not a picture of the unsaved. It's a picture of the saved who forfeited an inheritance. And the man beside the pool had been in his condition the exact length of that sentence.

"I Have No Man"

Jesus asked the man whether he wanted to be made well, and the man did not say yes. He explained the mechanism instead (John 5:7). He was talking to the Healer and describing the pool.

Look at how he words it: "while I am coming, another steps down before me." That's thirty-eight years of near-misses. He isn't describing a system that never worked; he's describing one that worked every time for somebody else.

Israel had no man either. Isaiah describes the LORD looking at His people in their sin and finding nobody to stand in the gap:

Isaiah 59:16

> He saw that there was no man, And wondered that there was no intercessor; Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; And His own righteousness, it sustained Him.

God looked over His people for a man and found none, and Isaiah's answer is not that a man was eventually located. God's own arm did the work, and Isaiah goes on to ask who would believe it: "And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?" (Isa. 53:1). The man by the pool said "I have no man" to the Man who was the LORD's own arm.

"Do You Want to Be Made Well?"

Notice that Jesus asked at all. Verse 6 says He already knew the man had been in that condition a long time, so the question was not for information, and a moment later He healed him with a word, so the healing didn't need the answer. The question was put because the man had to say where he stood.

Notice too what He did not ask. Not whether the man believed, not whether he was sorry, not whether he had kept the Law. He asked whether he wanted what was being offered — the one question on the table when a King is standing in front of a nation, and the question Israel had been declining to answer for centuries.

And the man never called out to Him. He hadn't asked for anything, and he didn't know who Jesus was even after he could walk (John 5:13). No faith is recorded, no request, no recognition; the initiative is entirely on one side. What Jesus asks for in return is not a performance. It is an admission.

God's dealings with Israel have always run that way. The healing has been available all along, and it waits on the nation wanting it from Him. Which raises the question of when she will.

After Two Days

Hosea gives the answer, and he gives it in order. God speaks first:

Hosea 5:15

> I will return again to My place Till they acknowledge their offense. Then they will seek My face; In their affliction they will earnestly seek Me.

Then the people answer:

Hosea 6:1-2

> Come, and let us return to the LORD; For He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. After two days He will revive us; On the third day He will raise us up, That we may live in His sight.

God withdraws to His place *till* they acknowledge their offense, and the healing comes after the nation says "let us return." On Peter's measure of a day as a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8), Hosea's two days are the roughly two thousand years of Israel's national death, and the third day is the thousand-year kingdom. The Sabbath's seventh day and Hosea's third day name the same day from two directions.

Because the return comes first, the nation's healing cannot come before she turns. A Jewish state on the land today doesn't change the count. A political state is not a healed nation, and the nation has not yet said "Come, and let us return to the LORD," so it's still the second day. The modern State is not what this sign points to.

The Sheep Gate

The pool lay "by the Sheep Gate" (John 5:2), and Nehemiah tells who built that gate:

Nehemiah 3:1

> Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors. They built as far as the Tower of the Hundred, and consecrated it, then as far as the Tower of Hananel.

The high priest built it, and it is the only gate in the chapter said to be consecrated. And there's a detail Nehemiah repeats for other gates that he never gives for this one:

Nehemiah 3:3

> Also the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars.

The same is said of the Old Gate (Neh. 3:6), the Valley Gate (3:13), the Refuse Gate (3:14), and the Fountain Gate (3:15). The Sheep Gate gets doors and consecration and nothing to shut it with. The gate the sacrifices came through was the one gate in the wall never described as shut against anyone.

Then note where the chapter begins and where it ends. It opens at the Sheep Gate (Neh. 3:1) and closes at the Sheep Gate (3:32). Everything in between is bracketed by the gate of sacrifice.

The sign was given beside that gate. Jesus would later call Himself "the door of the sheep" (John 10:7), and John the Baptist had already pointed at Him and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The One the sacrifices pointed to was standing a few steps from the gate they came through, and at the end of John's Gospel, over the sacrifice itself, He would say, "It is finished!" (John 19:30).

The Pool of Water

The pool is a large container of water, and water in Scripture carries the cleansing, healing life of God — living water that Jesus Himself identified with the Spirit (John 7:38-39).

But look at what the account actually does with it. Jesus never puts the man in. He does not carry him to the edge, does not wait for the water to move, does not so much as mention it. He speaks, and the man is well — dry, and nowhere near the pool (John 5:8-9).

The teaching sits in a single word in verse 3. The multitude lay there *waiting* — "waiting for the moving of the water." The water was still. It did nothing of itself. It had to be acted on by something outside it, at a time no one could predict, and until then there was nothing to do but lie there and watch it. That is the opposite of what living water means. Living water runs. It was living water Jesus offered the woman at the well (John 4:10), and the pool at Bethesda was the other kind: a basin, holding still, waiting to be disturbed.

So a crowd of sick people lay around still water hoping it would be stirred, while the living water walked in among them on His own two feet. He did not stir the pool. He had no use for it. The one man made well that day was made well by a voice, and the nation's healing will come the same way — from the word of her King, not from the arrangement she had gathered around and waited beside.

Five Porches, and a House of Mercy

The building was named for mercy, and it had five porches (John 5:2), five being the number Scripture repeatedly ties to grace. Which makes the scene at Bethesda a study in contrast. Five porches of grace sheltered a crowd of people trying to out-crawl one another to a stirring pool, and the man who most needed help was the one who could never win. Grace was in the name over the door and nowhere in the arrangement.

Then Jesus walked in, and grace stopped being a name on a building. He picked a man who could not win, asked him a question nobody else had asked him, and healed him where he lay.

Only One

A great multitude lay in those porches (John 5:3), all of them waiting on the water, and Jesus healed only the one man. His own words about the way to life describe the crowd:

Matthew 7:14

> "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

The "life" in that verse is the life of the coming age, not a standing before God. A crowd of Israel lay beside the water they trusted, and the One who is the way stood among them (John 14:6). The one man who walked out is not held up as the model of the few, either. John records no faith in him, no request, and no knowledge of who had healed him (John 5:13). He is the sign. The many still lying there show how the nation would answer: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11).

"Sin No More"

The sign does not end at verse 9.

John 5:14

> Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you."

This verse gets preached as a threat to the man's standing before God, as though Jesus were warning him that sin could undo what God had done for him. It cannot mean that.

Look at who Jesus is talking to: a man of Israel, found in the temple, the place where his nation's sacrifices were made. He was a son of the covenant before Jesus spoke to him and no more a son of the covenant after; what changed that day was his body. He had carried thirty-eight years of infirmity, and Jesus tells him something worse can come. He does not say what it is. He says only that it can come, and that how the man now lives is what stands between him and it.

The command itself is ongoing. "Sin no more" is the present tense of a walk — stop sinning, and keep on not sinning. It's the language of how a man lives, and the question of whom he belongs to is not in it.

What the Man Did Next

John 5:15

> The man departed and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Verse 13 says the man didn't know who had healed him. The authorities had stopped him for carrying his bed on the Sabbath, which they counted as work (John 5:10). He told them the man who made him well had told him to carry it (5:11), and when they asked who that was, he couldn't say (5:12-13). Then Jesus found him in the temple, and verse 15 has him going back to the authorities with the name.

John doesn't say why, and nothing in the verse marks it as right or wrong. The authorities had asked him a question, and now he could answer it. Notice how he puts it, too. They had asked who told him to carry his bed; he tells them it was Jesus "who had made him well." And when he spoke, the leaders had not yet set out to kill Jesus. That comes in the next verse, as a result.

What verse 15 does in John's account is clear enough: it's how the leaders learned who had healed on the Sabbath, and it sets up everything in verses 16 through 18.

What the Healing Set Off

The next three verses are the sign's real reception. A man who could not walk for thirty-eight years is walking, and the recorded response of the nation's leadership is the first plan in John's Gospel to kill the One who did it (John 5:16, 18). The charge was the Sabbath, and Jesus' answer made it worse: "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working" (John 5:17). He was claiming that what He did on the Sabbath was His Father's own work.

He was doing kingdom-day work on the covenant-sign day, in front of the men charged with guarding that covenant. The sign was legible, and that's why it produced fury rather than confusion. They did not fail to understand what He was claiming in verse 17. Verse 18 says they understood it exactly: He "said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God."

The other Gospels show the same climb. "This Man blasphemes!" (Matt. 9:3). The town of Nazareth tried to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). After a Sabbath healing in a synagogue the leaders "were filled with rage" (Luke 6:11) and "plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him" (Matt. 12:14). Then they credited His power to Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24), and finally there was a cross.

And this healing stayed with them. Months later, at the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus asked them outright, "Why do you seek to kill Me?" (John 7:19), and named the man at the pool:

John 7:23

> If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?

One man carried his bed through Jerusalem on a Sabbath, and the nation's leaders set their course.

Historical Notes

A few things here come not from Scripture but from tradition and historical writing about the period, and they're offered as tradition, not as text.

The gate is said to have taken its name from the sheep brought in from the markets north of the temple, where lambs were sold for sacrifice, and the pool beside it is said to have been where those sheep were washed before they were offered.

Tradition also holds that Jesus usually entered Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate, the Triumphal Entry excepted, and that the road from that gate led out toward Golgotha, the way He would walk to the cross.

If those traditions hold, the Lamb entered the city through the gate the lambs came through.

Where the Account Leaves Off

Everything in this scene points at one thing: a nation lying sick at the edge of a promise she had no power to reach.

She had a system, and a schedule, and a place to wait. She had generations of watching somebody else get there first. She had a name over the door that said mercy and an arrangement underneath it with no mercy in it anywhere. And on the day appointed as the sign of her covenant, beside the gate her sacrifices came through, the One who is Himself the living water walked into the middle of all of it and asked a man whether he wanted to be made well.

The man was made well. The nation was not, because the nation never answered the question. Verses 16 through 18 record what her leaders did instead.

That's where the account breaks off, and where Israel still stands. Hosea's third day has not come. But the Healer has stood in front of her once, and He'll stand in front of her again, and the answer she did not give at that pool is already written down: "Come, and let us return to the LORD; For He has torn, but He will heal us" (Hos. 6:1). On the day the nation says it — "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" (Matt. 23:39) — the seventh day begins.

A Secondary Application

Everything above belongs to Israel. The sign was given to her, the Sabbath is hers, the third day and the seventh are her calendar, and her healing is hers. None of it transfers. What carries over to a Christian comes as a second step, along a different line. By refusing her King, Israel forfeited the kingdom's heavenly portion, and that is what's offered now to the Christian (Matt. 21:43); her earthly portion is still hers (Rom. 11:29). The question Jesus put at the pool, and the way a man answers it, are put to him as well.

The question is still asked. "Do you want to be made well?" Jesus didn't drag the man out of the porch; He asked. The offer came first, and it came to someone with no leverage at all. What a man does with the question is his.

Answer with your condition, not your arrangements. The man at the pool answered Jesus with his plan. He did not have to fix anything first; he only had to be truthful about where he was. A church

can miss that too. Laodicea said, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and did not know it was "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

Believing and doing are one motion. Jesus told the man to rise, take up his bed, and walk — an instruction he had no ability to obey when he heard it. He obeyed it anyway, and the ability arrived in the obeying (John 5:8-9).

A system can keep you from the Healer. Every person in those porches was watching the water. There was a recognized way healing happened at Bethesda, and the whole crowd was turned toward it, which is how a multitude could be present when Jesus arrived and only one man leave changed. It is possible to be devoted to the right expectation, in the right place, on the right day, and still miss the Person standing in the room.

The walk is what's at stake. "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you" (John 5:14). A Christian's standing before God was settled by the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19), and it is not the subject here any more than it was for the man in the temple. How he lives is. The sacrifices came through that open gate to be offered, and Jesus told His disciples the same shape holds for them: "whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25). Each one's work will be tested by fire, "of what sort it is" (1 Cor. 3:13).

One caution belongs here. The signs in John's Gospel belong to Israel's history and to Israel's future (1 Cor. 1:22). They are not a promise that a Christian should expect, seek, or demand signs now, and Jesus' own comment in John 4:48 is not a compliment. A Christian who waits beside some modern pool for the water to stir, looking for the sign that will finally settle things, is waiting where the man in the porches waited for thirty-eight years. What that man needed was standing in front of him, asking him a question.

Jesus takes the same posture toward the church at Laodicea, the one that didn't know its own condition:

Revelation 3:20

> Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

He said that to a church, to people who already belonged to Him, and He said it from outside the door. The next verse names what waits on the other side of it: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne" (Rev. 3:21). He doesn't force the door, any more than He dragged the man out of the porch. He stands, and knocks, and waits for the one who will hear.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.