

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## Healing at Bethesda

By Dan Trygg

“...a certain man was there, who had been thirty-eight years in his sickness. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, ‘Do you wish to get well?’ ...Jesus said to him, ‘Arise, take up your pallet, and walk.’ <sup>9</sup> And immediately the man became well, and took up his pallet and began to walk. Now it was the Sabbath on that day. ...for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But He answered them, ‘My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.’ <sup>18</sup> For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.”  
John 5:5,6,8,9,16-18

Many manuscripts begin chapter 5 by saying, “After these things was *the* feast of the Jews”, referring to the Passover. This would, then, be the second Passover mentioned in the gospel of John (cf. 2:13). An entire year has passed since Jesus had changed the water into wine at Cana of Galilee. This gives us a better time frame to see how the events from Jesus’ baptism in chapter one until this point, especially concerning the arrest and execution of John the Baptist, could fit into the sketchy narrative that we have. Since this was “the feast”, *Jesus went up to Jerusalem*. This is the third time He had been in Judea since the beginning of the book (cf. 1:19,28,43; 2:13; 4:3,43-47).

John reports that there “is” a pool, called “Bethesda”, having five porticoes. (Could the present tense indicate that the temple and the pool were still intact, indicating a date before 70 A.D. for John’s writing?) The sheep gate was mentioned by Nehemiah (3:1,32; 12:39 – The rebuilding of the walls was started by the high priest at the sheep gate). In 2005, this pool was located by archaeologists. It is, as John reports, near the sheep gate of the temple, and has five porches. **The pool was just north of the temple.** It is a rectangle, divided by a wall or dike. At Jesus’ time, covered colonnades, or porches, went around the circumference, and the dividing wall also was designed to be a covered porch, making five porches in all. Obviously, the author was familiar with the site. The only mention of this pool in ancient writings is this account by the apostle John. **The name, “Bethesda”, could mean “house of mercy” or “house of shame”,** a fitting place for those who were placed there, ...the sick and deformed, those who were *hoping* for mercy.

**The latter part of vs. 3, and all of vs. 4, are not in the older and best manuscripts.** They seem to have been added by a later (fifth century?) scribe as an explanatory note. He apparently was reporting a theory, as to why the “stirring of the water” in vs. 7 was so significant. **Church historian Eusebius (260-340) supposed that the healing power came in conjunction with red-colored water which would occasionally flow into the pool.** Origen (185-254) and Cyril of Jerusalem (Bishop from 350-386) wrote of a spring that would flow with a ruddy colored water in an intermittent fashion. There is a spring known that does agitate the water in such a fashion, though the reddish water is no longer in evidence. (From the article, *Bethzatha*, in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*).

**Verse 5 tells us that “a certain man was there”** -- The Greek verb implies ongoing or continuous action, meaning that **this man was there customarily, or had been there for some time. He had been sick for thirty-eight years.** This information could only have come from someone who had talked with the man. **Waiting by the pool was his last hope.** We are not told what his sickness was. It was not simple paralysis or being lame, for these maladies are specifically described by particular words. **The word used for this man is a generic word for sickness or weakness.** It is actually a compound of the word for strength or robustness with a negative prefix. Thus, it means “unstrength, infirmity, or weakness”. **Whatever had befallen the man, it had left him without strength in his muscles,** yet was not the same as paralysis. Observation: This man had been afflicted with this weakness longer than Jesus Himself had been alive on planet earth. An entire lifetime, certainly this man’s best years had passed by.

**When Jesus saw him, He could easily recognize that he had already been a long time in that condition.** He must have been a sorry sight. His muscles must have been atrophied, his clothing and possessions mere rags. **The Lord asked him, “Do you wish to get well?”** (vs. 6) The question was very direct, evidently to probe the man's desire to live life. Was he simply there to await death? Had he totally given up on life, or could hope be awakened in him?

**The sick man's explanation for having not been healed was, “I have no man to put me into the pool.”** Whatever friends or family he may have had, had long since abandoned him, or could not stay there by the pool to wait for the phenomenon to recur. “...when the water is stirred up, ...while I am coming, another steps down before me”. **His weakness was so severe that he could barely move at all, or at best very slowly.** From his remark, it seems that only one person would be healed at a time.

**“Jesus said to him, ‘Arise, take up your pallet, and walk’”** (Vs. 8). Notice that **Jesus gave the man something to do.** To the man who had been unable to get his body down from the poolside into the water, *this would*

be an impossible task apart from a genuine healing. **By his obedience, the miracle would have an immediate outward, visible expression.** The word translated as “walk” means more than just to ambulate, it means to “walk about (ongoingly)”. It was not a simple “stand up and stretch demonstration” that Jesus asked for. **He was demanding a continual, ongoing demonstration of healing.**

**Immediately the man became well, and took up his pallet and began to walk about** (vs. 9). The Greek for “well” literally means “whole, sound, or healthy”. This is not the usual word for “healing”. It was used of the restoration of the hand that was shriveled (Matt. 12:13), of the deformed being made whole (Matt. 15:31), or of the woman whose flow of blood was stopped (Mk. 5:34), and of the lame man in Acts 3, who was born lame, yet was able to jump up, leap and run about. **This man, in John 5, not only stopped being afflicted, but he had the strength and wholeness to get up and carry his cot.**

**“Now it was the Sabbath on that day.”** This is very important information for the rest of the account. **The Jews (John's way of referring to the religious leaders) were objecting to him “working” on the Sabbath.** The religious teachers had interpreted the commandment about the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11) in such legalistic, confining and exacting ways that it had become oppressive. Its true purpose had become lost in the minutia of religious tradition (Mk. 2:23-28; cf. Ex. 20:8-11; 31:13,14; Deut. 5:12-15). **Jesus did not break or abolish the fourth commandment, but He did “loose” the Sabbath from such legalistic restrictions** (Matt. 5:17-19). **Ultimately, in Him its purpose is fulfilled** (Heb. 3:12-4:10). **Jesus healed on the Sabbath on numerous occasions.** Controversy with the religious leaders over this is recorded in all of the Gospels (e.g., Matt. 12:1-14; Lk. 13:10-17; 14:1-6).

**When confronted, the healed man said, “He who made me well was the one who said to me, ‘Take up your pallet and walk’”** (Vs. 11). “I’m simply doing what I was told. *He* healed me. I did not think I should argue. It was *His* idea. *He* was at fault.” **They asked, “Who is the man...?”** These leaders want to find out who is responsible for this outrage (Vs. 12). **But, the man who was healed did not know** (Vs. 13). Beside the fact that Jesus had faded into the crowd was the fact that this man had been out of circulation for years, being confined at the pool. He had had no other opportunity to hear of or see Jesus anywhere else.

Vs. 14 tells us that **Jesus later found him in the temple.** Whether the Lord was actually looking for him, or whether He simply came upon him in the crowd, **He had a word of warning to speak to him, “Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore.”** **This “sin no longer” may imply that his affliction had somehow been related to a previous sin or pattern of sin.** Possibly it had been a judgment for the man's sin. If true, it would have been clear to the man that Jesus somehow knew what his sin had been, and that possibly he was considering returning to old ways. **“...so that nothing worse may befall you.”** This would seem to be a very ominous warning, indeed, especially in light of the man's experience of the past thirty-eight years!

**“The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus”** (Vs. 15). **This seems almost incredulous!** Either the man was angered at being confronted about his sin, or he was intimidated by the Jewish leaders. **Amazingly, within just a few minutes of his dramatic healing, he betrays the one God had used to heal him!**

**“For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath** (Vs. 16). They could not see past their legalistic interpretation to be affected by the wonder of this miraculous healing. Instead of the miracle causing them to question their interpretation of the law, or of who Jesus is, they became even more offended and incensed at Him. The use of the plural *these things* indicates that this was not the only such incident that the religious leaders were offended by.

“He answered them...” (Vs. 17). **What follows is Jesus’ explanation or defense for His actions.** “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” The verbs are in the present tense, meaning continual or ongoing action. What Jesus is saying is that **the Father has not stopped working.** In fact, **it is the Father who did this work of healing this man.** **Jesus was just responding in conjunction with what He saw the Father doing** (vs. 19). He did what He did because it’s what the Father wanted to do. If anyone had not kept their Sabbath regulations, it was God Himself -- that should give them cause to reconsider their theology!

**“For this cause therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him...”** (Vs. 18). This was a serious business. This was not simply a matter of personal opinions, or debate about interpretations. **“He not only was breaking the Sabbath...”** -- The first offense worthy of death, as they saw it. **“...but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God”.** This is an important point that John does not want us to miss. **These religious leaders heard Jesus speak of His relationship to God in a way that was different than that of others.** He evidently claimed a unique Sonship that was not the same as other men. **This is the first example in this gospel of what is termed an “unequivocal claim”, ...one which was clearly understood as a claim to Divinity by those hearing Him, as evidenced by their reactions.** Does Jesus “backpedal” in His following explanation (vss. 19-47)?