

*Healing on the Sabbath: John 5:1-17*  
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The miracle of the incarnation. That's what we reflect on this time of year. Celebrating the birthday of Jesus. Celebrating that the Father sent His Son into this world. Jesus, the eternal Word, taking on flesh. In order to save us, He came down from heaven into this fallen world, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary in that stable in Bethlehem.

This is not merely a heartwarming story we tell ourselves each December. It's not a myth. It's not a fairy tale. These are historical events, historical realities, that mean everything to us. God has spoken His Word into this broken world. He has pierced into this darkness with a shining Light. He has become one of us in order to help us and heal us and give us hope.

In our passage from the Gospel of John this morning, we're going to see the healing power of Jesus. He is the God-Man with divine power to heal. He is working as His Father is working. But His gracious work on behalf of hurting people is met with fierce opposition from legalists. Here they find fault with Him because He heals on the Sabbath. Which is so sad and ironic, because the Sabbath is about rest. But as Jesus is bringing true rest to people, these legalists want destroy Him.

### **Jesus Heals**

Jumping into the story then . . . We see that Jesus is traveling down south again to Jerusalem. He had been up north in Galilee when He healed the official's son (the events we studied last Sunday at the end of chapter 4). Now He travels again to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts.

He went to a particular place in Jerusalem where He knew there were many sick people. It was a place where these sick people felt like they had some chance of being healed. There was this pool that was thought to have healing powers. People thought that if they could get in the water right when the water was stirred up, then they would be healed.

Many of our modern translations leave out verse 4, and I think for good reason. You might notice that your Bible has a verse 3 and then a verse 5. But then there's probably a note that says, "Some manuscripts insert, wholly or in part, these words: 'waiting for the moving of the water; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had.'"

By the way, don't let this trouble you when we encounter minor textual issues like this. Because they are minor, indeed. We have thousands of manuscripts, and there is such a high level of agreement among these ancient manuscripts. We can therefore be very confident that what we read in those manuscripts (and what is then translated into English and found in our Bibles) is so very close to what was originally spoken and written.

The minor discrepancies like we encounter here just remind us of that fact. First of all, because the discrepancies are minor. Whether or not verse 4 was in the original copy of the Gospel of John, it's not going to affect any major doctrine of Christianity. And secondly, because there are so many manuscripts, we can come to well-informed conclusions about what reading is closest to the original.

On this verse, the conclusion that makes good sense to me is that verse 4 was added later on in order to give some more explanation to this man's actions. He and many others must have been under the impression that an angel would periodically stir the water in the pool, and whoever got into the pool first when that happened, would be healed.

The point is that this man's hope of being healed is quite a stretch. Even if the pool of water had some healing power, this man who has been crippled for 38 years hasn't ever been able to get in at the right time. It's somewhat surprising that he's still there trying. Apparently that's his only shred of hope that he will ever be able to walk.

Jesus asks him an interesting question in verse 6, "Do you want to be healed?" The man doesn't realize this is the Messiah. He doesn't realize that the Person standing before him asking this question has the power to heal him instantaneously with a mere word.

In his ignorance, the man doesn't even directly answer the question. His thoughts are on the pool there before them. His hope is simply that he could at some point be helped into the pool at the right time and thus be healed.

We should observe Jesus' compassion here, that He is drawn to this place where He knew He would find a multitude of people with physical ailments. And He comes with a purpose to heal this particular man. As verse 6 tells us, "Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time." Jesus knew about this man. Just like He knew all about the woman at the well, about her past, about her heartaches. Jesus also knew this man who had been unable to walk for 38 years. Jesus came to heal him.

As the man is explaining the situation about the water and why he hasn't been able to get to the water quick enough, Jesus

speaks with authority and power, “Get up, take up your bed, and walk.” And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked.

A few verses later, in verse 13, we find out that Jesus departed at that point because there was a crowd in the place. As we talked about some last week, Jesus’ purpose wasn’t to impress the crowds. Especially because He knew that many in the crowds were only interested in His healing powers and not in His identity as the Messiah. So Jesus performed this wonderful miracle but then left the scene.

He wasn’t done interacting with this man, though. Jesus sought him out a second time, this time in temple. In verse 14 Jesus said to the man, “See you are well!” Jesus wants the man to realize that he is really and truly better. Jesus has miraculously made the man’s body well.

And then Jesus says something that may confuse us a bit. It may be a little troubling to us. Jesus tells the man, “Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.” What are the implications of that statement? Is Jesus saying that the man’s sin is what caused him to be crippled for 38 years? Does that mean that all of our ailments are directly tied to particular sins? If we would just stop sinning, then we would be healed?

I don’t think that’s the point of Jesus’ statement here. One very clear reason I have for saying that is because of an account just a few chapters later in this same Gospel. In John 9 Jesus heals a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples asked Jesus, “who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him.” It’s certainly not the case that every physical malady is the result of a particular unconfessed sin in a person’s life.

God brings various trials into the lives of His children and uses those trials for our good. Our family heard a powerful testimony this week from Laura Story, a singer and songwriter who did a concert at the church where our son, Micah, goes to preschool. We found out about this benefit concert she was doing there Thursday evening and decided to go. It was a great evening of worship. One of her songs that you may be familiar with is called “Blessings.” Here are some of the lines.

We pray for blessings, we pray for peace  
 Comfort for family, protection while we sleep  
 We pray for healing, for prosperity  
 We pray for Your mighty hand to ease our suffering  
 And all the while, You hear each spoken need  
 Yet love us way too much to give us lesser things  
 'Cause what if your blessings come through rain drops

What if Your healing comes through tears  
 What if a thousand sleepless nights are what it takes to know  
 You're near

What if trials of this life are Your mercies in disguise

Those are great lyrics. There is wonderful truth conveyed in that song, and I've appreciated hearing it. It wasn't until the concert on Thursday that I heard some of the story behind it. Laura shared how she and her husband had been married for less than 2 years when they found out he had a brain tumor and needed to undergo a serious operation, a risky operation. There were many possible outcomes to the surgery. He might die. He might lose all of his memory up to that point.

Laura shared this on Thursday in a very meaningful, and also light-hearted way. She described the interaction that happened just as Martin woke up after the surgery. Laura was right there, of course. And Martin recognized her (which was a relief), knew who she was, but didn't know she was his wife. He said, "Laura Story! . . . what are you doing here?" And then she explained to him, Martin, I'm your wife. We're married. To which Martin responded, "Yes!" She was happy to hear that.

It's been 10 years now since that surgery. Martin and Laura have 3 kids. But Martin is still not fully healed. His brain has not fully recovered from that tumor and the complications of trying to remove it. He continues to suffer from the effects of a serious brain injury, including short-term memory loss, which makes their lives very complicated and difficult. But they recognize the blessings that have come from those difficulties, through those difficulties, that the trials of this life can truly be God's blessings in disguise.

In some cases, Jesus brings complete, instantaneous physical healing, like in our passage this morning, or in the passage we studied last week where Jesus healed the official's son.

But many times the healing doesn't come. That doesn't mean we should stop asking. It does mean that we should trust in Him whether or not He grants healing. And part of the lesson in this passage is that holiness is more important than healing. When Jesus says to the man, "Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you," He's pointing to the fact that spiritual transformation is way more significant than physical healing. Like the woman at the well, Jesus knows this man, knows the patterns of sin in his life, knows the spiritual thirst in his life. And Jesus is telling him, turn from your sinful way of life. Because if you don't repent, there's a judgment day coming that will bring things far worse than your 38 years of sickness. Jesus will be talking about the judgment later in this same chapter. In verse 29 He warns that those who have done evil will face the resurrection of judgment.

It's possible that this man, though healed physically, if he doesn't repent will be far worse off for all eternity.

The same is true for us. We may long for physical healing, for success in our careers, for harmony in our families, for any number of material / relational / earthly blessings. But it could be that God is loving us in such a way that He's not going to let us settle for those lesser things. It could be that through the pain of not having some of those things, He's drawing us closer to Himself and sanctifying us as He pries the idols from our clenched fists.

We've seen Jesus' compassion in healing this man physically and then seeking him out a second time to speak to his spiritual need.

### **Legalists Oppose Him**

The other thing it's important for us to consider in this passage is the conflict regarding the Sabbath. The end of verse 9 alerts us to this, noting that Jesus performed this miracle on the Sabbath. And then we see the Jews reprimanding this man who had been healed. These would have been Jewish religious leaders who were opposed to Jesus' ministry. That's often who John is referring to when he uses the term, "Jews." We see their heartlessness and their legalism in their questioning of this man. They don't care about the fact that this man has just been healed. Just think of it. This man must have been exploding with excitement over what had just happened to him. And then these Jewish legalists confront him, and they don't share in his excitement one bit. Just the opposite, they scold him for carrying his rolled up mattress. Talk about raining on someone's parade. This is awful. And this is what legalism does. No joy. No compassion. Just condemnation.

When the man tells them he's just doing what he was told, then the Jews want to know who told him to take up his bed and walk. At this point the man still doesn't even know who Jesus is. But later, after Jesus talks to him in the temple, then the man goes and tells the Jews who it is.

Verse 16 tells us, "And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath." You have to understand that the Jewish religious leaders were absolutely obsessed with Sabbath regulations. They took a very good and gracious command of God and turned it into a legalistic club, a weapon to wield religious authority over others.

The Old Testament gives instructions to the Israelites to rest on the Sabbath, on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2). And then in the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20, the fourth commandment reads, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall

labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work . . . . For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (vv. 8-11).

Then in Exodus 31 we see that the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant. “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, ‘Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a *sign* between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you’” (vv. 12-14). Then a few verses later God continues, “It is a *sign* forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (v. 17). This is the significance of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. It was a day of rest, following God’s pattern in creation, and it served as a sign of God’s covenant with His people. It was a gracious gift of God to His people, to give them rest.

But the religious leaders, in their legalistic zeal, turned that rest into work. They took a beautiful and merciful gift, and twisted it into a means for religious merit. They tried to specify, in every imaginable situation, what would constitute work. And the insanity of their rules is seen in the fact that they objected to this man carrying his bed (which would have been a rolled up mat under his arm or over his shoulder). These legalists can’t rejoice in the miracle of the man’s healing. They don’t even care about that. They just care about the rules.

And they hate Jesus because He represents a salvation not based on rules but on grace. That would be totally out of their control, so it terrified them and infuriated them. Their hearts were stubbornly set against Him. They hated Him so much they wanted to kill Him.

I want to briefly compare this passage with a passage in the Gospel of Mark.

Read Mark 2:23 – 3:7

### **Believers Find Rest in Him**

Let’s just focus for a moment on Jesus’ claim to be Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus first, in verse 27, makes an obvious point that shows how mistaken the Pharisees were in their treatment of the Sabbath. He says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” The Sabbath is a gift to mankind. It should be received as a gift. It should be received as a sign of God’s goodness and grace to give His people rest. That’s how it is intended, and that is how it should be received. The Sabbath was made for man. But the legalists had it exactly backwards. They

were acting as though man was made for the Sabbath. The way they multiplied their rules and enforced their rules made it seem like they were the ones providing the gift and the Sabbath was the receiver of their gifts. Their religious legalism was such that the whole equation was turned around. It was as though they were placed on the earth for the purpose of rigidly maintaining a ridiculous list of Sabbath rules. So instead of resting and receiving a good gift from God, they took that gift and turned it into a work. They took a merciful provision and turned it into a way of feeding their pride.

Then in verse 28 Jesus makes the earth-shattering statement, “So the Son of Man [referring to Himself] is lord even of the Sabbath.” This is a very bold claim. An authoritative claim. God is the One who instituted the Sabbath, and now Jesus is claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath.

This shows how the Sabbath is a profound pointer to Jesus. The Sabbath is not ultimately about resting on the seventh day of the week. The Sabbath rest which God gave to His people was meant to be a pointer to the rest we find in Christ. Paul writes in Colossians 2:16-17, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Paul is saying that the food laws and the festivals and the Sabbaths of the Old Testament are all pointers to Christ. They are shadows, Christ is the substance. We saw something similar earlier in the Gospel of John, in chapter 2, where Jesus spoke of Himself as the temple. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” He was speaking about the temple of his body. The temple and the Sabbath are both Old Testament pointers to Jesus.

Therefore to understand the Sabbath rightly is to understand that it is all about Christ. Christ is our Sabbath rest. The way the Pharisees treated the Sabbath was completely missing the point. The Sabbath points to Christ, and they were so fixated on the pointer that they missed what it was pointing to.

### **What Does the Sabbath Mean for Us?**

I want to close by asking, what does the Sabbath mean for us? Augustine said in a prayer to God, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in You.” That’s the point of the Sabbath, and that’s how we keep the Sabbath today—by trusting in Christ, resting in Him. Don’t work for God. Rest in Him.

We need to focus on the sufficiency of Christ’s work for us. “Jesus paid it all.” It’s not that Jesus paid 95% and we have to labor to make up the last 5%. No, Jesus paid it *all!* And therefore,

we have nothing to pay. We have nothing to earn. We have no work to do as far as our salvation is concerned.

So as we look to the Lord of the Sabbath, our Savior Jesus Christ, don't try to keep the Sabbath by keeping a list of rules. Keep the Sabbath by looking to Jesus in faith, the One who paid it all for us, the One who did all the work necessary for our salvation, the One who is sovereign over all our circumstances. Forsake all hope in your own efforts. Repent of the restlessness that arises from various sins in your heart. And find rest in Jesus.

In the last verse of our text for this morning, Jesus says, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." That's an interesting statement, and one that I think sheds even more light on the Sabbath rest offered to us. The reason we can rest, the reason we don't have to work, work, work trying to gain God's favor, is because Jesus has done the work for us.

Do you remember in the previous chapter when Jesus told His disciples (John 4:34), "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work (to finish his work)." Jesus came to do the Father's will and to finish his work, to complete it, to accomplish it. And in John 17:4 in the high priestly prayer Jesus says to the Father, "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished [or finished / completed] the work that you gave me to do." And then on the cross Jesus said, John 19:30, "'It is finished' (completed, accomplished), and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit."

Jesus finished His work, in obedience to the Father, and for our eternal good. He did the work. He lived a perfect life. He died that horrific death on the cross. And He rose from the grave on the third day, proving that His work was effective. He conquered death!

So the Good News for us is that we receive from Him . . . not a list of rules that are like a religious club to beat up ourselves and others. No, the Good News is that we receive from Him the work that He has accomplished, that we can rest in Him and in what He has achieved.

The Gospel of Matthew chapter 12 records the same events I read from Mark 2-3. Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath, and then the healing of the man with the withered hand. Just before that, at the very end of Matthew 11, we find the comforting words of Jesus that summarize what this is all about. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Don't oppose Jesus like the legalists. Instead rest in Him. He has done the work. Don't demean His work by trying to add to



it or improve upon it. Receive His work as a gift. Honor Him by putting your full trust in what He has done to secure your salvation.

Just think of the wonder of the incarnation. God has done this for us, made this provision for us, to give us the very best gift of all time. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to bring us true rest, eternal rest.