

IV. Israel's Rejection of Jesus (5:1-12:50)

John's prologue set the orientation and tone of his gospel account and one of its primary themes is the Word's incarnational appearance and rejection: He came into the world which He created and to those who were His own by covenant election and, though He was the light of men, the dark world was unable to discern Him and refused to embrace Him (1:9-11). Thus John began his record by recounting Jesus' "coming to His own" – first in connection with John the Baptist, and then to the people of Galilee, Judea, Samaria. And having laid that foundation, John turned his attention to the outcome of Jesus' self-presentation, namely Israel's increasing hostility and opposition to their Messiah. He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him.

A. The Healing at Bethesda (5:1-47)

Appropriately, John introduced this dynamic of rejection and opposition in connection with Jerusalem, which was the epicenter of the nation's antagonism and the place where it would reach its apex. Though a millennium earlier Yahweh had consecrated Jerusalem under David as the site of His sanctuary and the place of His throne (cf. Deuteronomy 12:1-11; 2 Samuel 5-7; 2 Chronicles 6:1-11), it had long since become empty of His presence and indistinguishable from the places that epitomized human rebellion and idolatry (cf. Deuteronomy 29 with Isaiah 1:1-15, 3:1-9; Jeremiah 3:1-14; Lamentations 4:1-6; Ezekiel 16:1-54). The temple and city were rebuilt following the Babylonian conquest, but Yahweh had not returned. His sanctuary remained empty as a fitting testimony to the continuing desolation and estrangement of the covenant household. For more than five centuries the priests, leaders and people had gone through the motions of worship, but with the painful sense that their piety was hollow; Yahweh's Shekinah had not returned to fill the Holy of Holies. Moreover, His absence was a constant reminder of their guilt and uncleanness, for their prophets had told them that their unfaithfulness which had provoked Yahweh's departure and the destruction of the covenant kingdom would not be addressed until Yahweh returned. As long as He remained in exile, so did they (cf. Isaiah 40:1-11, 42:1-46:13, 52:1-10, 59:1-62:12; Ezekiel 37-38, 39:21-29, 43:1-9; Joel 2-3; Micah 3:1-4:8; Zephaniah 3; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 1-2, 8-10, 14; Malachi 3-4).

John understood all of this and the fact that the prophesied day of theophany had come: Yahweh *had* returned to Zion and taken His throne in His sanctuary just as He promised. But He had done so in His Servant-Messiah (1:14, 2:13-21, 4:19-26). In the most profound of ironies, the very covenant children who longed, prayed and watched for Yahweh's merciful, restorative epiphany were poised to miss it. But they would miss it, not because it slipped by them unnoticed, but as a matter of open hostility and opposition. In this way Jesus' generation would show itself to be true children of their forefathers (cf. Matthew 23:29-39; Acts 7:51-52).

1. John notably used Israel's festal cycle to frame this section of his record. Here he stated that a "feast of the Jews" brought Jesus to Jerusalem (5:1), but he didn't identify it by name. It's possible that it was one of the three feasts which required all Jews to travel to Jerusalem (Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles), however John characteristically identified such major feasts by name (ref. 2:13, 6:4, 7:2, 11:55; cf. also 10:22 where he identified the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah)). Also, chapters 6 and 7 seem to indicate that this feast was neither Passover (a spring feast) nor Tabernacles (a fall feast).

This conclusion is further supported by John referring to this event as “a feast of the Jews,” whereas he employed the definite article with this phrase (“*the* feast of the Jews”) when referring to the feasts of Passover and Tabernacles (Booths) in 6:4 and 7:2. Whatever feast this was, John clearly didn’t feel the need to identify it, which shows that he didn’t believe it contributed anything to the episode and its significance; rather, it was merely the occasion for Jesus’ presence in Jerusalem and this miraculous healing.

He had previously healed a young boy in Galilee, so this was not Jesus’ first healing miracle. John’s account leaves open the possibility that He had performed similar signs in Jerusalem when He was there previously for the Passover (2:23), but it’s also possible that the people of Jerusalem had seen nothing like this before. Either way, the context is clear that this miracle fueled and solidified the opposition of the Jewish elite, particularly because of its timing. The ruling establishment was already well aware of Jesus (2:13-20, 3:1-2, 4:1-3), and His behavior and the stir He was causing had convinced them that it was probably best to eliminate Him. But this supernatural healing pushed them over the top; not only did it leave them in the awkward position of trying to explain it to the people, Jesus’ action and assertions about Himself openly contradicted their teaching regarding the Sabbath and undermined their authority. Even if these rulers could endure a measure of embarrassment, there was no way they were going to risk their authority and power; if some were previously unconvinced that Jesus had to die, this healing seems to have removed all doubt (5:15-18). As to the episode itself, it consists of three parts: the healing of the sick man at the pool of Bethesda (5:2-9), the Jews’ response to it (5:10-18), and Jesus’ answer to them and their objections (5:19-47).

2. John recorded that this miraculous work took place at the pool of Bethesda and involved a man who’d been infirmed for thirty-eight years. John didn’t identify his specific affliction, but the passage indicates that it had left him unable to stand or walk, so that he depended upon other men to transport him on a pallet (vv. 5-9). The circumstance of this healing is challenging for two reasons: The first is the description the text provides; the second is the fact that this passage isn’t present in its entirety in many manuscripts of John’s gospel. Many of the oldest and best manuscripts don’t contain the second half of verse 3 or verse 4; others have the second part of verse 3, but omit verse 4. Almost certainly 5:3b-4 is a later gloss added to clarify the obscure nature of the circumstance and explain the man’s later statement about the stirring of the water (v. 7). But even if vv. 3b-4 is a later insertion into the text, the circumstance of the healing is still important to John’s account and must be explored. (The early readers obviously recognized the importance of the circumstance; hence the addition of the clarifying gloss.)
 - a. John recorded that Jesus performed this healing at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. This is the sole scriptural reference to this pool and John’s account only notes that it had five porticoes and was located near the Sheep Gate (5:2). (Archeologists actually found and excavated the site several decades ago.) The book of Nehemiah mentions the Sheep Gate, but doesn’t describe its location. However, most locate it in the northeast section of the wall surrounding Jerusalem and its name reflects the fact that sacrificial sheep were brought into Jerusalem through it. (Interestingly, this gate was built by the priests; Nehemiah 3:1).

- b. Far more obscure is the ritual which transpired at the pool. Apparently people suffering from various infirmities would congregate there in the hope of obtaining miraculous healing. The text indicates that an angel of Yahweh would appear on occasion and manifest his presence by stirring the water in the pool. Whoever first entered the pool when that happened would receive the Lord's healing. The fact that John didn't provide this commentary, but merely mentioned the stirring of the waters (5:7), suggests his confidence that his readers would be familiar with this ritual and its purpose. John may have assumed no clarification was necessary, but his assumption was incorrect, prompting a later copyist to fill in the gaps. And whoever this editor was, *he* obviously recognized the circumstance John was referring to. This suggests both that this redactor was a Jew and that this ritual at the Bethesda pool was a longstanding and familiar practice in Israel.

The ritual itself raises several questions: Did these angelic visitations really occur, and, if so, what prompted them and the intervals between them? And what would motivate Yahweh to sporadically send an angel with the instruction to heal whoever was fortunate enough to be the first into the pool? Moreover, this arrangement put infirmed people in the difficult position of having to devote their days to loitering by the pool, keeping their attention focused on its water for any movement. As a result, many would have effectively consumed their lives hoping and waiting for a miraculous move of God that never happened. This whole scenario is peculiar at best, but it is also inconsistent with the way God works. Some further considerations perhaps help to resolve some of the difficulties:

- First, and most importantly, *John* didn't indicate that these visitations and healings actually occurred (though many people obviously believed they did); his only reference to them is the infirmed man's comment to Jesus.
- A later redactor explained the phenomena, but this doesn't prove these things actually happened or even that he believed they did. (Some attribute the occasional movement of the pool water to an intermittent spring.)
- Most readings of verse 4 refer only to an angel, not specifically an angel of Yahweh. A generic reference moves these occurrences away from the Lord and His involvement and situates them within the realm of myth.

It seems, then, that John recorded this episode, not to authenticate the angelic healings, but to show how Jesus drew upon this familiar Jewish superstition in order to demonstrate that the anguished longing and hope of cleansing and renewal which provoked it were now to be satisfied in Him.

The sick, lame, blind and withered in Israel waited expectantly for a divine visitation that would stir up healing waters. They believed this visitation was coming and they hoped to experience its power in physical healing. But this dynamic reflected the *nation's* longing: Israel itself was waiting for the theophany which would heal the disease of its guilt and alienation (Isaiah 35; Micah 4:1-8).

Israel's prophets had promised this theophany and its restorative fruit, *but in connection with the coming of Messiah and His kingdom* (cf. Zechariah 2-3; Zephaniah 3:8-20 with Isaiah 59; also Isaiah 40:1-11 with 42:1-9; 49:1-13, 61:1-3; Jeremiah 33:15-17; Ezekiel 34). When Jesus came to Jerusalem and acted that day at the Bethesda pool, He was doing more than healing a man's withered body; His actions spoke of the glorious truth that Israel's long night of exile, anguish and longing was at last passing. The incarnation of the Logos meant that Yahweh had returned to Zion to fulfill His good word of liberation and healing – not figuratively or abstractly, but as actually embodying that word of purpose and promise in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus was His Father's *amen* in the flesh, so that His words and works were the words and works of Yahweh Himself. Whether or not John made the connection at that time, he clearly did later, evident in the way he chose to record this episode (ref. esp. 5:17-30).

- c. John noted that, when Jesus came to the pool, His eyes fell upon this withered man. The ground under the surrounding porticoes was covered with sick and infirmed people; why Jesus chose to single out this individual is not clear. Perhaps the man called or reached out to Him; perhaps his condition was particularly arresting. John's only clue is his comment that Jesus was aware that this man had endured his infirmity for many years (though he doesn't explain how Jesus came to know this). However this man came to Jesus' attention, He approached him and asked him if he desired to become well (5:6). On the face of it this was a ridiculous question – obviously the man wanted to be made whole; why else would he spend his days beside the pool? So Jesus undoubtedly knew the answer to His own question, which indicates that He had another reason for asking it. And that reason seems to be to force the man to challenge and rethink his own expectations: *If he truly hoped for restoration, why was he putting his hope and trust in an empty and powerless Jewish myth?* In this sense his folly mirrored that of the nation he was part of: The sons of Israel were likewise longing and waiting for a day of divine visitation and healing. And, like this man, they, too, were trusting in a cultural and spiritual fiction. The stories and convictions of others had convinced this man to expect his restoration in a certain way (note his response in verse 7). So the people of Israel were expecting their national restoration to come through a messianic king who would lead an army against Rome, drive the pagan overlords from the covenant land, purge Yahweh's sanctuary and re-establish David's throne and the sovereignty of his kingdom.

Thus the man answered Jesus' question by responding that he desired healing but feared it wouldn't happen. And it wasn't that his hope was misplaced, but the remedy was beyond his grasp. When the angel came and the water was stirred, he couldn't enter the pool. With that Jesus directed him to rise to his feet, take up his pallet and walk (v. 8). The man was misguided in his expectation and so completely caught off guard by Jesus and His work. He'd received his healing visitation, but not the one he expected. It wasn't an angelic messenger who'd come to him, but Yahweh Himself in the "messenger of the covenant" (Malachi 3:1), and not in the movement of water in a pool, but in the move of His Spirit.