

Women's Bible Study Spring
So That You May Believe: The Gospel of John
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I've been away recently visiting family in California. During that time Emily and her two children traveled with me to my sister's house. Paula and Mike have a 4 acre ranch in central coast which was a children's paradise to 3 year old Charlie, who promptly fell in love with Barney.

Barney, as you can see, is a very large Saharan tortoise. He's a relative youngster; at age 25 and 100 pounds, Barney could easily live another hundred years and weigh 200 pounds. Even in Barney's youth, he outweighs Charlie by about 75 pounds, and has the ability to unintentionally crush a small hand with his powerful beak.

Nonetheless, with in the care of Uncle Mike, Charlie took the greatest delight in feeding Barney celery. Mike knows how to handle Barney. He knows that if Charlie sat down to feed Barney, the tortoise could unwittingly flatten Charlie as he always crawls towards food. But with Mike's help, Charlie had an experience he will always remember.

Our story today involves someone who was helpless, who could not improve his situation without the help of Jesus. So please turn with me to John chapter 5 verse 1 and we will look at:

I. The healing

Now this healing is probably taking place in the fall of AD 28, assuming that Jesus' ministry began with his baptism in early 27 AD. While the dating is somewhat speculative, it appears that many months have passed since Jesus began his Galilean ministry by changing water into wine, then clearing the Temple. John's gospel is silent about these intervening months, perhaps because we have more information in the 3 synoptic gospels. So please look at verse 1:

"Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals.² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed." (John 5:1-3)

Excavations in Jerusalem have turned up a double pool with five colonnades in the northern quarter of the old city, near the Sheep Gate and the modern day St. Anne's church. Biblical scholars have concluded that this was likely the pool of Bethesda.

So,

- **What happened?**

Take a look at verse 5. Tradition says that when the water was agitated, the first person into the pool would be healed.

⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" ⁷ "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when

the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” (John 5:5-8)

Picture this scene. There are lots and lots of sick people around this pool. Many of them made their living begging at the pool. Here is one who was paralyzed and unable to move much at all, let alone to be first in the pool at the right time.

So why would Jesus ask this man, obviously in need of healing: “Do you want to get well?” It’s a piercing question, not a rhetorical one. Jesus always cuts right to the heart. You see, there are an awful lot of us who are laboring under decades of affliction. Maybe it’s an emotional hurt from a relationship that we cannot fix, but we can’t quite recover from it either. Perhaps it is mental illness like depression or anxiety that continues to cripple us. Or maybe it’s chronic pain that we don’t believe can be fixed - but we are not willing to take steps to help it, like losing the weight that is killing our joints. I think if Jesus asked us, “Do you want to get well?” sometimes we’d have to admit that no, we are used to life the way it is, even though we are settling for something subpar.

Along those lines I’d like to mention an upcoming opportunity brought about by one of our group leaders, Sue Davies. It’s called “Living Well With Chronic Conditions”, and it’s a free 6 week workshop here at Autumn Ridge designed to help people improve their experience of living with chronic physical conditions. There’s a flyer on the registration table, or you can contact Sue with more questions. In pondering this question, Do I really want to get well? it seemed a natural fit to try to provide one type of resource for improving our experience.

You should also be aware that pastors at church can connect you to mental health and counseling resources for the many among us who struggle with those issues. Do I really want to get well? Sometimes it means stepping out and trying something new, in the power of God.

If this man had been paralyzed for 38 years he would have only known how to lie there and beg. To be healed would mean that he’d have to find a way to make a living. So “Do you want to be healed?” is a legitimate question, and we can see by the man’s response that he was a bit ambivalent.

Notice he didn’t say, “Yes! I’d love to be healed!” but rather, “I have no one to help me into the pool.” But Jesus, able to discern the man’s need, says “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”

This story poses a big question.

- **Why him?**

Jesus didn’t choose him because of he was lovable and attractive. A man who’d been living outside, unable to take care of his needs, would probably have been physically repulsive, smelly, emaciated and covered in bedsores.

Nor did Jesus pick him because of his eager desire to be healed. The man himself couldn’t give a simple “Yes” when asked if he wanted to be well.

Neither did Jesus want to heal him because of his sinless nature. Look at verse 9:

⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."¹¹ But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' "¹² So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?" ¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well. (John 5:9-15)

There are two things to note here. In verse 14 Jesus warned him, "stop sinning or something worse may happen". That seems to imply that sin had something to do with getting him into this fix in the first place. It is clear from Jesus' words in John 9:2 that physical affliction is not usually a result of sin, but it appears from this passage that sometimes sin does it. We have a friend who wrapped his car around a tree while blind drunk and nearly killed himself at age 19. He hasn't touched a drop since, but that hasn't stopped him experiencing damage to his spine and legs over time from that accident. There are times when physical affliction, like sexually transmitted disease, is a result of sin. But some commentators suggest that Jesus may have been warning the man to believe and live differently so that he didn't come under judgment in the future after death. Either way, physical healing doesn't necessarily mean spiritual healing as well.

The second thing to notice is the extraordinary reaction of the Jewish leaders. Everyone knew who the paralyzed man was; he was a fixture at the pool for almost four decades. Instead of marveling at him walk, all they notice is that he was carrying his bedroll on the Sabbath and breaking Jewish law. Isn't that a sad response to a miracle? In the next section we'll look at what led to this poor understanding of the Sabbath, but for now, ponder for a minute the danger of ignoring the work of God among us.

So why did Jesus choose this man? Was it to pick a fight with Jewish leaders? Was it because this guy was more worthy than the invalid next to him?

I think we can answer those questions by asking another one.

- **Why me? Why you?**

The whole point of the gospel is that God's love is neither earned nor deserved. God did not save us from our sins because we were beautiful and worth saving. He didn't save us because we had the good sense to say "Yes" to Christ. No, the Bible suggests that it is in spite of our unattractiveness that God chose us:

"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins..." (Col. 2:13)

Dead means "unable to do anything for ourselves". Dead people cannot choose life. But God brings the spiritually dead to life by forgiving our sins.

⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. (Ephesians 1:4)

The gospel is grace. It has nothing to do with who we are, nor what we will become.

It has everything to do with God's love for us. He desired the restoration of our friendship enough to send his Son to die for us. In the same way as Jesus picked out this one unpleasant individual at the pool of Bethesda, God has picked you and me and calls us to himself because he loves us.

So that's the story of the paralyzed man. Very quickly his healing turned into a pretext to persecute Christ, and in the next section we discover through Jesus' words

II. The truth of what Jesus does

Look at verse 17, where we see first that:

- **Jesus Works**

16 So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. 17 In his defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." 18 For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:16-18)

The Sabbath was a beautiful gift to mankind, given in the Ten Commandments and modeled upon God's own behavior from Genesis 2:3. There we read that God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from the work of creation. Work is not a curse. It was created by God and given as a sacred trust to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam's work was to name all the animals, and then to care for the Garden (Genesis 2:15). This work was delightful, purposeful, and obedient to God's will. In our lives we can sometimes catch a glimpse of that fulfilling aspect of work, but all too often we experience the curse that Adam received, when he and Eve left the Garden after the Fall. Adam's work would be now be hard and frustrating.

The Jews took "Remember the Sabbath Day" and over time married that God-given command to human tradition. They developed a list of 39 categories of work, often involving hairsplitting distinctions. For example, a man could spit in the dust on the Sabbath, but if the spit rolled along in the dirt and created a little furrow, that was considering plowing – which was work. So instead of being a day of rest where hearts could rejoice in God's goodness, the Sabbath became a day of nervous rule keeping.

So it's fascinating to me that Jesus states that his Father is always at his work, and Jesus himself was carrying out this work of God. We can only guess at what that work is, but this passage implies that God's work is to bring people to himself through his Son.

But the Jews didn't even stop to think about whether God was working or resting. Instead, they were enraged that by calling God his Father, Jesus stated that he was equal with God. Now look at verse 19:

19 Jesus gave them this answer: "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. 21 For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. (John 5:19-21)

It is John's privilege to give us insight about the Trinity. Jesus does what he sees his Father doing. The Father withholds nothing of his intent or power from Jesus. All this was

groundwork for Jesus' coming statement in John 10: 30 – "I and the Father are one." But this early in his ministry, these were new concepts and infuriating to the Jews. After all, if someone claims to be equal to God, might they not also be a rival to God? Yet Jesus tells us that he does not compete with God...he **is** God, God in human form.

Next we see that

- **Jesus Judges**

Look at verse 22, where we learn more about the work of Christ:

²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.²⁴ "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life. (John 5:22-24)

This too was radical. Only God was the Judge of all, and Jews were uncomfortably familiar with the Day of the Lord, when all would face God's judgment. But now Jesus, who looked just like any other Jew, was claiming that God had entrusted all judgment to him. Worse, if they didn't honor Jesus, they didn't honor the Father. Observant Jews felt that everything they did was to honor the Father – all that rule keeping, all that sacrifice and so on. They adhered as closely as they could to what they knew about having a relationship with God. Now Jesus is suggesting that could all be short circuited. They could avoid judgment and have eternal life, without all the rules. It is breathtakingly simple, but extraordinarily radical to the Jews.

So Jesus works the work of God. And he judges in the judgment of God. But also:

- **Jesus Gives Life**

Look at verse 25:

²⁵ Very truly I tell you, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. ²⁶ For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. ²⁷ And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.

²⁸ "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned. ³⁰ By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. (John 5:25-30)

In the back of any reflective person's mind is the question, "What happens when I die?" We recently met with a neighbor who died just 24 hours later. In that situation, not really knowing the family, what does one say to someone facing eternity who has no religious background? Very few people are simply willing to lie down and enter death without any preparation.

Jesus felt this same urgency with his hearers, yet unlike us, he had the power to make the spiritually dead hear. Even the physically dead will respond to Jesus' voice at the end of time and rise to judgment. At that time, we will be identified as God's children, or not.

If this doesn't send a chill down your spine, it should. We are all tangled up in our day to day tasks, while moving inevitably towards death. It may seem a long way off, but please,

don't put off the moment when you face Jesus in this life and place yourself in his care. There comes a time when it is too late.

After explaining that God has given him the responsibility for doing God's work, giving life and judging, Jesus now begins to introduce proof to validate what he's saying. These Jewish leaders are trained theologians with legal minds. So this next section reads like a courtroom defense, providing proof which would have convinced the Jewish leaders if they were only open to hear it.

So next we see

III. The proof of who Jesus is

The next section is found in verses 31 through 47. I'm not going to read through them, but please keep your Bibles open to this passage as we pull out various verses

Like a defendant in court, Jesus introduces witnesses for the defense. Underlying all these is the most important witness, God, but Jesus begins with ones that they will acknowledge more easily.

The first is

- **John the Baptist**

Look at verse 33:

"You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth." (John 5:33)

The Jews were familiar with John's ministry of baptizing for repentance. They did not perceive John as a threat since John did not claim to be the Messiah, but merely pointed to him. That made John like the Old Testament prophets, who all pointed to a Messiah who hadn't yet arrived. However, the Jews chose to ignore John's words: "But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry." (Matthew 3:11) They didn't realize that Jesus was already here and a contemporary of John's.

So John was the first proof, but the second is

- **Miracles**

Look at John 5:36:

"For the works that the Father has given me to finish – the very works I am doing – testify that the Father sent me." (John 5:36)

Remember that Jesus had just caused a paralyzed man to walk. After 38 years of paralysis, there would be muscle wasting and weakness. Yet this man is strong enough to jump up and carry his mat through Jerusalem. Is that what happens with faith healers today? If someone staggers to their feet and walks a few halting steps from their wheelchair across the stage, is that a miracle? This bears no resemblance to the healing miracles Jesus performed, which were instantaneous and permanent. Bodies were fixed on the spot, whether it was blindness, bleeding, or paralysis. And we should be hesitant to call anything a miracle which doesn't meet that criteria – instantaneous, complete, permanent, impossible to explain by normal medicine.

So miracles were part of the works that the Father gave Jesus to finish. Miracles were proof of Jesus' divinity, because they revealed the Father's infinite power in Christ.

The next witness is:

- **Scripture**

Look at verses 37-40.

Here Jesus rebukes the Jewish leaders because they are so familiar with scripture but so completely clueless about the Messiah standing before them who has been the whole point of scripture's revelation. Jesus says to them:

“You study the scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:39)

I like to take pictures through windows. It's because I like the way the window frames the view. And sometimes, to be fair, they are interesting windows, like this one from the ancient abbey at Iona in the Outer Hebrides. What is really beautiful, though, is what you see *through* the window - the sunlight on water and the island of Mull. So if I only concentrated on the window itself I'd be missing the point, wouldn't I? Windows are there for the light and the view. They are a means to an end, not the end itself.

Scripture is like a window – it is a frame for an excellent view of God – and even more clearly, the Messiah. The Old Testament is the story of how mankind needed a solution to the sin introduced by Adam. Over and over again we are directed to the coming Messiah. But Jewish tradition took scripture and made it into an end in itself rather than a frame through which we see God. The Jews failed to see the heart behind the God of the 10 Commandments – not a deity who says “Thou shalt not,” but One who longed for us to see the heart's desire behind those boundaries.

Finally in verse 45, he introduces

- **Moses**

Now remember, Moses was revered as the bringer of the Law. And any believing Jew counted their ancestry back to Moses' time and put their hope in the Law that Moses had transmitted from God. Yet Jesus says in verse 45:

“Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” (John 5:45).

It's interesting that Jesus said “Moses wrote about me”, for we have no specific quote on the Messiah from Moses. It's also intriguing that he said “Moses wrote”, given the modern criticism that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch even though these five books have traditionally attributed to Moses. The Jews revered Moses! But Moses could only point to the Messiah, and Jesus was that Messiah.

The Jews had all the resources they needed to look for and welcome Christ as the promised Messiah, but instead their hearts were hardened and their ears were closed. Instead of seeing a miracle they saw a broken rule. Jesus ends this chapter by saying sadly “But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” (John 5:47)

And that brings us to

- **You and Me**

Like the Jewish leaders we have a choice. Think for a moment about whom you trust in this world, and why you trust them. Is it because their life matches their words? It is a wonderful thing to be able to trust another human, but we can also be devastated if they break our trust.

Jesus had a warning about this trait in verse 43:

“I have come in my Father’s name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?” (John 5:43-44)

I think Jesus knew that we humans would always have a tendency to believe the hype of those people who have the confidence to proclaim their own greatness, skills or ability. Do we accept glory from one another, but fail to seek the glory that comes from God? Why would we trust people, but not God?

I am thankful Jesus is trustworthy, not in a merely human way, but fundamentally and without change. Just as Jesus is obedient in doing God’s work, so believers in Jesus will be obedient to him. Later in John’s gospel Jesus explains this process:

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.” (John 17: 6)

The encouraging part is that Jesus gradually draws us to himself through his word and his witnesses around us. So if you are not quite there yet but are feeling a curiosity or a tugging on your heart to know more about Jesus Christ, that impulse comes from God. It is Jesus revealing God to you and gradually bringing you to himself. Don’t ignore it; why waste precious time in your life wandering in circles when you could have the wonderful clarity of belonging to God?

When in California two weeks ago we hiked up to Mt. Wilson, which for over 100 years has housed a massive couple of telescopes and serves as the main center for radio transmission in that part of Los Angeles. This first shot shows Mt. Wilson in the distance, and also the extraordinary clearness of the day – since what you can see in the distance is the ocean and beyond that Catalina Island, some fifty miles from where the picture is taken.

As we finished our hike and our walk around the observatories, we returned to the car, but Ron’s key fob wouldn’t work to open the door. Eventually we saw a sign behind us on the fence housing the radio antennas saying “Your key fob may not work due to the strength of the radio signal in this area.” Ah, that made sense. A stronger force was canceling out the weak signal of our keychain.

We can think of that call of Jesus in our lives as the stronger force of the radio tower. Eventually it is going to pull us in the direction of his love and his care. We will then be free from the judgment that awaits all mankind. We will know that we are God’s children and that we are here to serve as the witnesses that God intends for us to be in this world. Jesus has brought out witnesses to the truth of his word – John the Baptist, miracles, scripture, Moses. Now we can join this parade of witnesses to Jesus. He promises,

“...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) Amen!

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