

## Help for the Helpless!

### John 5:1-14

Online Sermon:

[http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

In the first part of John chapter five we are told of a miraculous event that happened when Jesus was on His way to one of the Jewish festivals. Which great feast of Israel Jesus was heading too, the Feast of the Tabernacles, Feast of Weeks<sup>1</sup> of some other one, was not the focus of this story<sup>2</sup> but instead a miracle that He performed near the Sheep Gate at two pools called Bethesda.<sup>3</sup> Located at the “northeast corner of the old city



of the old city

Jerusalem,”<sup>4</sup> the high priest Simeon had two large pools constructed in c. 200 BCE to supply water to the temple.<sup>5</sup> “Each pool was trapezoidal in shape, and the overall length of the two pools (north to south) was about 318 feet. The smaller pool to the north was about 197 feet wide on its northern side and the larger southern pool was about 250 feet wide on its southern side.”<sup>6</sup> It was located near the Sheep Gate, had five porches around it,<sup>7</sup> and was known as the “House of Mercy” due to it being a site of miraculous healings. When the “intermittent springs that fed the pools”<sup>8</sup> or more likely the angel of the Lord<sup>9</sup> stirred the waters the first person that entered the pool was healed. These five great porches were filled with the impotent, blind, lame, helpless and wretched ones!<sup>10</sup>

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*It should not come to a surprise to us the reader to learn that Jesus is not mentioned at the festival but at the place where multitudes of sick people were gathered<sup>11</sup> desperately longing but with little hope of being the “one” that would be cured!*

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, [John](#), Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 84.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 356.

<sup>3</sup> Colin G. Kruse, [John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>4</sup> Colin G. Kruse, [John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, [The Gospel according to Saint John](#), Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 193.

<sup>6</sup> Colin G. Kruse, [John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 147.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Benfield, [“The Great Physician \(John 5:1–9\).”](#) in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 470.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, [“The Gospels and Acts.”](#) in *NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 1902.

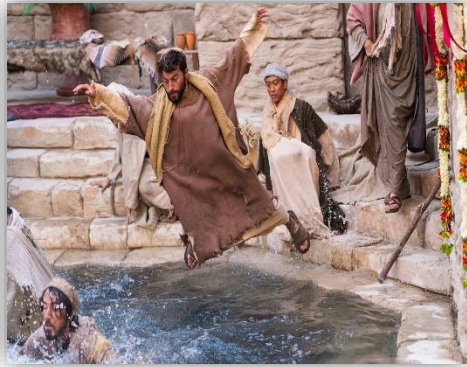
<sup>9</sup> Tony Evans, [“Help for the Helpless.”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015), Jn 5:1–9.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Benfield, [“The Great Physician \(John 5:1–9\).”](#) in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 470.

<sup>11</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, [“Jesus at Bethesda: Or, Waiting Changed for Believing.”](#) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 13 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1867), 194.

## The Helpless Situation

It is at this point in the story that John introduces us to the depths of one person's helplessness. The problem with the pools of Bethesda was that when the water stirred only the first person who entered it would be cured!<sup>12</sup> How our hearts go out to the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years



(Mark 5:25-34), and the woman crippled for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17)<sup>13</sup> but John tells us that there is a man present in the crowd who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years (verse 5)! I guess this makes perfect

sense for what chance did this man have to be quicker to get into the pool than those with withered hands, the blind or even the lame but still able to walk? John does not want us to miss out on the irony of this situation for the Great Physician Jesus Christ Himself was in their midst and yet in their helplessness and spiritual blindness<sup>14</sup> not one of them called out “Son of David have mercy on me!” Lest we think too little of them and too much of ourselves, is not this story indicative of what humanity

has always been like?<sup>15</sup> Looking out upon this world that is not our home (Hebrews 13:14-16) are there not multitudes of hurting people,<sup>16</sup> waiting for life to get better but year after year suffering in great pain and turmoil, feeling like they have no hope of being cured?

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*“If you would turn down a back street and open some door, there you would see numbers, almost multitudes, of suffering, sorrowing, dying creatures”<sup>17</sup> all around us! And even if one does not suffer from physical health issues are there not many more who in their spiritual deadness experience excruciating pain of being separated from God, always looking for but never find joy and peace that surpasses all understanding (Philippians 4:7)?<sup>18</sup>*

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And while it seems foolish that the helpless did not recognize the Great Physician in their midst, whom of those suffering right now can honestly say that the planks in their eyes have not blinded them to the truth that God is not only indivisible present everywhere (Psalms 139) but also heals by a single command!

<sup>12</sup> Tony Evans, [“Help for the Helpless.”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015), Jn 5:1–9.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, [The Gospel according to Saint John](#), Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 193.

<sup>14</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, [“Jesus at Bethesda: Or, Waiting Changed for Believing.”](#) in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 13 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1867), 195.

<sup>15</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 356.

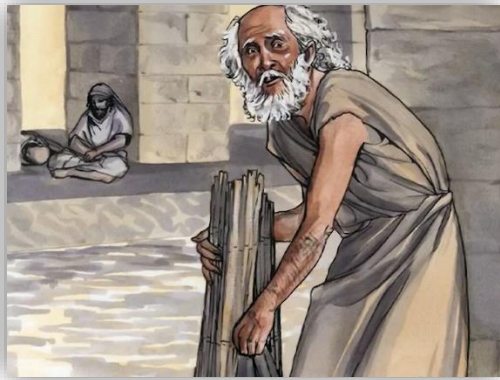
<sup>16</sup> Joseph Parker, [Mark-John](#), vol. 21–22, Preaching through the Bible (Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 516–517.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Parker, [Mark-John](#), vol. 21–22, Preaching through the Bible (Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 514.

<sup>18</sup> Chris Benfield, [“The Great Physician \(John 5:1–9\).”](#) in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 471.

## The Excuse and Cure

Knowing this man had been an invalid for 38 years Jesus asked him a provocative question: do you want to be healed (verse 6)?



Obviously, the invalid wanted to be cured but was quick to state that it was not his fault the healing had not occurred, “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” (verse 7). One can almost hear this poor man’s voice crackle as he remembered all those times, he saw someone else receive healing and he was left to live a life of misery and pain!<sup>19</sup> He sought help from others to receive the cure<sup>20</sup> only to find them as preoccupied on “self” as he was!<sup>21</sup> Jesus performed many miracles in Jerusalem<sup>22</sup> and yet the crowd of blind, lame, and paralyzed people did not recognize the Great Physician Jesus was in their midst who had the power to heal all of them and yet none of them recognized Him.<sup>23</sup>

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*Like the invalid we are quick to look to others to help alleviate our suffering and pain and blind to the truth that the Great Physician is willing and able to heal not only our physical bodies but also our very souls!*

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How easy it is to fall into a deep pit of despair when one does not know and make Christ the Lord of one’s life!<sup>24</sup> It is at this point in the story that Jesus tells the invalid, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” and at once the man was cured and he picked up his mat and walked away (verse 8)! This healing was very unusual for it was not done at the man’s direct request to Jesus<sup>25</sup> but instead was the initiative of the Good Shepherd giving onto the sheep unmerited grace and mercy! O how many times has Christ done good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28) by speaking into their very hearts the message of hope that all things are possible for those who believe in Him (Mark 9:23)! Even if the man did not fully understand the depravity of his illness and lacked faith<sup>26</sup> as tiny as a mustard seed that would move the mighty mountains (Matthew 17:20) of his infirmities, the Lord looked upon him with compassion and mercy and gave to him not what he deserved but what he so desperately needed!

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Benfield, “[The Great Physician \(John 5:1-9\)](#),” in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 472.

<sup>20</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, “[John](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 62.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Parker, *Mark-John*, vol. 21–22, Preaching through the Bible (Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 519–520.

<sup>22</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 150.

<sup>23</sup> Chris Benfield, “[The Great Physician \(John 5:1-9\)](#),” in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 471.

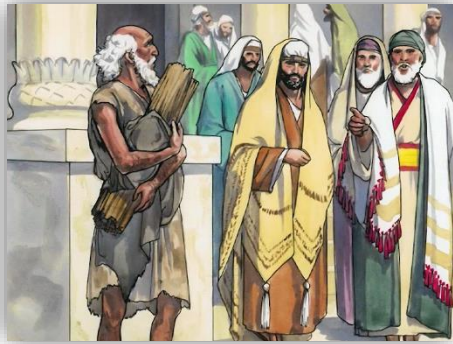
<sup>24</sup> Chris Benfield, “[The Great Physician \(John 5:1-9\)](#),” in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 472–473.

<sup>25</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, “[John](#),” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 62.

<sup>26</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 269.

## Religion verses the Word

As this man is carrying his mat most likely through the streets of Jerusalem or near the temple precincts<sup>27</sup> and during a Jewish festival this act brought not only him but “Jesus directly into conflict with the Jewish authorities.”<sup>28</sup> Even though the mat



was likely “made of straw, light enough to be rolled up and easily carried upon a healthy person’s shoulders,”<sup>29</sup> the Jewish leaders were quick to tell this man, “it is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat” (verse 10). This statement

would have instilled fear in the man’s heart for breaking the sabbath law had the death penalty attached to such a grievous offense (Exodus 31:14, 15; cf. also Numbers 15:32-36).<sup>30</sup> Not being of the “stuff of which heroes are made of,”<sup>31</sup> this man was quick to tell the authorities that he was only obeying the One who told him to “pick up his mat and walk” (verse 11)! When they asked him for the identity of his healer the man told them that he did not know who He was (verse 13). This makes me wonder do we as Christ’s ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20) and royal priests (1 Peter 2:9) truly know the identity of our Lord,

Saviour, and king any better than the healed man of this story? We have been given grace and mercy and every possible spiritual blessing in Christ’s name (Ephesians 1:3), and yet can we truly say we are holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:16)? Do we not spend way too much time trying to control the future that is uncertain and unknowable instead of seeking first the kingdom of God and all things will be added unto us (Matthew 6:33)? When God invites us to “lack nothing” by the quiet waters that refreshes our souls” (Psalms 23:2-3) are we willing to take time to be holy or does the turbulent waters of our own selfish desires keep us locked in our prison of chasing after trinkets and toys that promise joy but only result in unending coveting and despair? As His sheep, do we really listen to His voice (John 10:27-30) considering His demands to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Him (Matthew 16:24-26)? Or maybe in this story we are like the Jewish authorities so interested in religious tradition and looking good on the outside that our relationship with the Lord lacks because we are “full of dead man’s bones and all things unclean (Matthew 23:27)?”

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*I would rather be under the wings of my Lord  
(Palms 91) and being fed by my Master even  
if I must endure the boils of Job and live a  
short life for this would be far better than  
living a long life of health, wealth and  
prosperity but forever looking for but not  
finding He who gives me life!*

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<sup>27</sup> Colin G. Kruse, [John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 149.

<sup>28</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, “John,” in [The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: John and Acts](#), ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 62.

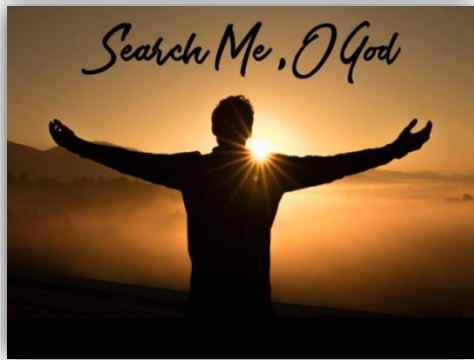
<sup>29</sup> D. A. Carson, “[The Gospels and Acts](#),” in [NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible](#), ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 1902.

<sup>30</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, [The Gospel according to Saint John](#), Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005), 195.

<sup>31</sup> Leon Morris, [The Gospel according to John](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 271-272.

## Finding the Root Cause

To finish this story John tells us that later Jesus finds the man at the temple and said to him, “see you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (verse 14). “After having dealt with the man’s physical infirmity, now Christ addressed his spiritual condition.”<sup>32</sup> While not every disease is the product of having sinned (John 9:1-3),<sup>33</sup> after



having investigated his heart Jesus found that like Cain (Genesis 4:7) sin was not only crouching at his door but for 38 long years it ruled over his life! Christ is the healer of the helpless<sup>34</sup> and yet how it must

sadden Him to see so many of His very own children suffering immense pain and loneliness of being separated from Him merely due to their love of the ways of this world (1 John 2:15). Unless we invite God to search our hearts to see what sin dwells within the “storms of punishment” will continue to rage and no amount of burying our heads in the sands of ignorance will in any way change the wages of sin that we are experiencing.<sup>35</sup> No matter how difficult the trial one is currently going through like

the man in this story Christ is telling you that something worse will happen if you keep cherishing your sin. What could possibly be worse than being an invalid for 38 years ... standing before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10) explaining why you wasted so many years doing bad and estranged from the very One who bought you at the price of His very life (1 Corinthians 6:20)! Since sin is not the only root cause of receiving calamities, “unless the spiritual cause of the visible reality”<sup>36</sup> of tribulations is addressed then how can one truly honor God with the appropriate response?

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*If trials and tribulations are due to sin then repent, if they are due to God wanting you to witness to others then do so boldly, and if they are the mere product of living in a fallen world then count your blessings and consider them nothing in comparison to the eternity you are about to receive (Philippians 3:9-11)!*

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The man is so overwhelmed with joy that the root cause of his calamities is known, and he has been forgiven that he goes and finds the Jewish leaders and tells them “It was Jesus who made me well.”

<sup>32</sup> Colin G. Kruse, [John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 151.

<sup>33</sup> Colin G. Kruse, [John: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 151.

<sup>34</sup> James Montgomery Boice, [The Gospel of John: An Expository Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 356.

<sup>35</sup> Tony Evans, [“Help for the Helpless.”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015), Jn 5:1-9.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Evans, [“Help for the Helpless.”](#) in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015), Jn 5:1-9.

## Do you Want to Get Well?

Let me finish by going back to Jesus' question he asked the invalid, "do you want to get well (verse 6)?" No matter how blessed you are today there is not one of us that does not need healing from the Great Physician! Only the Spirit who searches the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:11-13) and knows every



thought, word, or deed we will ever do (Psalms 139) can speak truth into our lives as to what we need to thrive in the Father's kingdom. To break the bonds of sin that so easily entangle us (Hebrews

12:1) we need but a mere word or touch from the Master.<sup>37</sup> He spoke all creation into existence, calmed storms, and even commanded demons to leave their prey alone. Though He be the Son of the Living God, the Alpha and Omega, the King of Kings, and the Chief Cornerstone, we must ever forget He is approachable for He is the Good Shepherd, our sympathetic High Priest who is always willing to forgive repentant souls and comfort those whose afflictions are insufferable! Redeeming difficult circumstances is done through seeking the Lord, while He may be found, and calling upon Him while He is near (Isaiah 55:6).<sup>38</sup> Those who cry out "Son of David have mercy on me"

(Mark 10:48) will not be disappointed for while Christ does not promise us an easy life, He promises to always do good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28). Thankfully, He promises to give us our hearts desire only when it aligns with His perfect and pleasing will (Romans 12:2). While it is ok to look to others to build one up in the faith, for iron does sharpen iron, let us not look to others to cure spiritual maladies that only He who knit us in our mother's womb can cure!

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*So, if you want to be made whole<sup>39</sup> sit at the feet of your Lord and bask in His grace and mercy and let us rejoice that "there is no divine expectation that does not have built into it, the enablement to pull off that expectation."<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> Chris Benfield, "[The Great Physician \(John 5:1-9\).](#)" in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 473.

<sup>38</sup> C. H. Spurgeon, "[Jesus at Bethesda: Or, Waiting Changed for Believing.](#)" in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 13 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1867), 196.

<sup>39</sup> Chris Benfield, "[The Great Physician \(John 5:1-9\).](#)" in *Pulpit Pages: New Testament Sermons* (Mount Airy, NC: Chris Benfield, 2015), 474.

<sup>40</sup> Tony Evans, "[Help for the Helpless.](#)" in *Tony Evans Sermon Archive* (Tony Evans, 2015), Jn 5:1-9.