

John 5:1-17. John 5 opens with the 2nd year of Jesus' ministry. By this time the religious leaders have come to view Him as an enemy. He healed many people, but He often healed on the Sabbath.

In the Old Testament we read about Babylon's siege of Jerusalem and exile of the Jews. Idolatry wasn't the only reason the Lord gave His people over to this. They failed to love Him, but they also failed to love one another. Their hearts had hardened and grew insensitive as they turned to other gods. God's people had little concern for the weak and helpless in their own midst.

God had commanded His people to be compassionate to the weak such as the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor (Deut 24:17-22; Isa 1:17; Jer 5:5-7). Yet, they reached a point where they didn't care. They exploited the most vulnerable members of society. The prophet Zechariah looked back on the Babylonian exile...

Zechariah 7:8-14—Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.' But they refused to pay attention... They made their hearts diamond-hard... and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known.

After the dust had settled, God's people never again bowed to other gods. They kept themselves externally pure, but the heart of Judaism again withered.

Greek culture pushed its way into the region with Alexander in 332 BC, and the Jews struggled to remain distinct or pure. Groups such as the Pharisees rose to prominence by creating rules to measure one's faithfulness. The burden of all their rules set one apart from the Gentiles, but it reshaped Judaism in a sad way.

First-century Judaism knew it was against all appearances of Gentile culture. Emphasizing the externals, the worship of God had less and less to do with the heart. The letter of the Law was often kept; the spirit of the Law was abandoned. It was a dead orthodoxy (Jas 1:27).

The deadness of first-century Judaism couldn't have been clearer than on the Sabbath. Jesus healed a man, but He broke the Sabbath. So many couldn't rejoice for one of their own. Why? Because their hearts had become hard as diamond.

THE HEALING OF A PARAPLEGIC

Healing sites are nothing new, and we have them throughout our world as much as ever. The Ganges River and the spring at Lourdes, France are two that attract *millions* of visitors every year. Whatever happened at these sites centuries ago, the stores have only grown with new elements. You know what's sad? Some of the most sick and weak find hope in these sites. They visit and then leave crushed.

John introduces us to an alleged healing site in the first century. Near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem lay the twin pools of Bethesda. Five colonnades supported a canopy that offered shade (John 5:3). A large reservoir kept the pools filled.

Great crowds of lame, blind, and paralyzed Jews came to Bethesda with the hope of healing. They would wait day after day in agony, watching and waiting for the pools to suddenly move. The one who entered first would be touched by an angel and healed. The waters would move, but it wasn't an angel. It was an intermittent spring.

When a man is desperate he might believe anything that offers hope. That was the draw of Bethesda. The sick yearned to be free of their suffering—physically and socially. Disabilities and incurable diseases were considered the result of sin (John 9:2). They were outcasts. Compassion was rarely demonstrated; acceptance was never given.

John 5 tells of a man whose legs had been paralyzed for 38 years. Daily, from one year to the next, he laid at these pools with a fading hope of being healed. This was all the hope he ever had until Jesus visited and asked, "Do you want to be healed?" (John 5:5-6).

Jesus didn't have to travel through Bethesda to enter the temple anymore than He had to travel through Samaria to reach Galilee. As with the woman at the well, He went out of His way for the sake of one lost soul. *You've been here for so long. Can I now help you?*

The Lord showed much love and compassion to a man who rarely would've experienced it. The paraplegic didn't understand, and it seems despair had crippled his soul to such a degree that he didn't even look up at Jesus (John 5:13). He just responded with sad talk about the pool until Jesus ordered: "Get up, take up your bed and walk" (John 5:7-8). And before the man tried to move, Jesus was gone.

Healed unto Holiness

A SABBATH CONTROVERSY

The Ten Commandments required one to rest on the Sabbath Day (Ex 20:8-10). Work was not to be done, but the command grew to encompass all aspects of life. Yes, God took the Sabbath seriously (2 Chr 36:21; Jer 17:21-22, 27), but the day of rest wasn't instituted for His benefit. The Sabbath was given for ours. The day that was supposed to be a blessing to man had become a curse (Mark 2:27).

By the first century, the Sabbath had devolved into a burden. For instance, the Law forbade travel on the Sabbath, but what exactly is "travel"? It's walking more than 1,000 yards beyond one's home. And what is a "home"? Well, if a rope is tied to one end of the street, the entire street was defined as a home. See the word games?

Let me give you another example... If on a Friday night, one left enough food for a "meal" at any given place (thereby establishing a home), he could walk to that place on the Sabbath. If one planned ahead well enough, he could place food within 1,000 yards of his last "meal" and walk all over Jerusalem without ever leaving his "home."

Rather than grasp the heart of the Sabbath, scribes sought to nail down its nuances. It wasn't about true worship, but iron-clad control. And that's why the leaders were livid. On the Sabbath, a man had been healed, and when he stood to walk he lifted the mat he had laid upon. It was work on the day of rest... a great sin (John 5:10-12).

All the man knew is someone had healed him, told him to carry his mat, and then left before he could put a name to the face (John 5:13). The man didn't need to know *who* healed him—whoever did it must be from God. He believed healing proves the healer's authority. As for the religious leaders? The healing didn't matter. It was done on the Sabbath—whoever healed must be a sinner.

This is what the desire to control does to people. The religious leaders had become so blinded by pride they couldn't even see a paraplegic was somehow walking.

WHY DID JESUS BOTHER?

Had Jesus stayed at Bethesda a mob would've formed around Him. He healed and immediately left. The area was filled with thousands within a 1-mile radius. They had come for one of the annual feasts. It would have been easy for Jesus' to hide though impossible to find someone again.

The man who had been healed likely thought he would never know who healed him. Jesus, however, sought the man later that day when the two could speak in private. He knew exactly where to look.

But why bother? Because the Son of God didn't come to earth to heal—He came to "seek and save the lost" (Lk 19:10).

JESUS OFTEN HEALED A MAN PHYSICALLY IN ORDER TO REACH HIM SPIRITUALLY.

Physical healing was never an end in itself; Jesus repeatedly used it as a bridge to spiritual matters. When He spoke with this man, He urged him: "Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you" (John 5:14). *Turn to Me from your sin. I healed your body in order to heal your soul. You were healed that you might be holy.* And if he refused, something worse than 38 years of paralysis awaited—God's judgment. It was a gracious healing, warning, and offer of salvation.

Such great compassion caused quite a disturbance that day. Was it all for the sake of this one man? Not entirely. Yes, Jesus loved this man, but also healed to confront the religious authorities. If He were to save them, He had to unmask their pride.

The Sabbath was no longer a day of rest for the glory of God but a day of enslavement that appeared holy. It had become the day when religious hypocrisy reached its zenith and the heart was at its hardest. Jesus worked on the Sabbath to shatter this hardness and offer salvation.

The religious leaders could look upon suffering and those writhing in pain without shedding a tear. It's apparent they knew nothing of the heart of God. So filled with compassion He's ever at work showing kindness to every person who has ever lived (Matt 5:45; John 5:18). It was this kind of love that looked upon ruined sinners and died to save (Rom 3:23, 5:8; Eph 1:4-5).

When confronted by a God like this, the hearts of the religious leaders became as hard as their forefathers. They would now begin persecuting Christ. Within two years of this, they would have Him killed at the hands of the Romans. Truly the same sun that melts the wax also hardens the clay.