

Gospel of John

Session 7

Last week we dealt with the story of Jesus healing of the Nobleman's son, which takes place at Cana of Galilee, the place where Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding feast because they had run out of wine.

The healing of the Nobleman's son demonstrates that Jesus, Incarnate Word, merely needs to speak the words: "Go your son will live" and the son is healed. The Nobleman "believes", and not only does he believe, but his entire household comes to belief and faith.

This is a story that describes that the new eschatological age has broken in and begun. The Gentiles are welcome into God's Kingdom, if they simply believe. Belief in Jesus, is the essential criteria that determines one's being in or out of the Kingdom. Those who believe, enter. Those who do not believe will not enter the Kingdom.

This morning we pick it up with chapter 5, and the story of the healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethzatha. For the next 5 chapters of John's Gospel we will be looking at and dealing with the Jewish feasts.

The 7 feasts that are laid out to Moses in Leviticus 23 are:

1. Tabernacles
2. Passover
3. Pentecost

4. Unleavened bread
5. First Fruits
6. Trumpets
7. Atonement (Yom Kipur)

The first three feasts are known as the pilgrimage feasts, because it was expected for faithful Jews to journey to Jerusalem to the temple. The last 4 did not require such a pilgrimage.

In chapter 5, Vs. 1 – we are told simply that there was a feast of the Jews. We do not know which feast it was. But since Jesus went to Jerusalem and the temple, it is assumed that it was either Tabernacles, Passover or Pentecost.

Jesus, John tells us “went up” to Jerusalem. Typical of John’s Gospel, he does not seem to care about geography and chronological time. In chapter 4 Jesus was in Galilee in the north. So he would have needed to go “down” to Jerusalem. John is leaving things out that do not suit his purposes. John cares about Kairos, God’s time. So John has no hesitancy to say: “Jesus went up to Jerusalem”. Matthew, Mark and Luke would not likely do so.

Vs. 2 - The Sheep Gate is where the sheep were brought and kept in Jerusalem, right next to the temple. They were used for sacrifice. There was a pool there, in Hebrew called Bethzatha. It had 5 porticoes, or sections. This pool was discovered in an architectural dig in the 1900’s. It was 165-220 feet wide, and 315 feet long. It had 5 sections with steps built in the corners so that people could step down into the waters when they were troubled. This is probably a spring fed supply of water. It may have functioned like our modern hot tub, at least today many people have hot tubs for medicinal and therapeutic reasons.

Vs. 3 – Many disabled people gathered there with the hope that they could be healed by the waters. In some of the earliest manuscripts of John, there was a verse that in many modern Bibles has been left out. Check your Bible. Are any of you missing vs. 4 so that your Bible jumps from vs. 3 to vs. 5? My RSV does. It has the following footnote: Vs. 4 is left out due to the following verse that was included in many of the earliest manuscripts: Vs. 4 reads as follows: “For from time to time an angel of the lord used to come down in the pool, and the water was stirred up”. It was believed that the first person to enter the waters when it was stirred up, would be healed. So those who were gathered at the pool of Bethzatha were there seeking healing.

Vs. 5 - we read that a man who had been lame for 38+ years (it does not say he sat by the pool for 38+ years), encounters Jesus.

Vs. 6 – Jesus sees him there, and asks him if he wants to be healed? Of particular note in this verse are the words: “Jesus knew” the man’s situation. This is a subtlety put but important statement. It says that God knows everyone of our situations in life. There is nothing about me that God is not aware of. Sometimes that comforts me, other times it scares me.

Vs. 7 – The lame man answers – I have no one to help me get into the waters when they are stirred up. John is suggesting that through this man’s plight, we see all of us and the entire human population and condition. We want to be healed but we can’t find our way to the healing. We are infirm. Without assistance, the man cannot be healed.

Vs. 8 – Jesus gives him an imperative command: “Rise, pick up your pallet and walk”.

Vs. 9 – The man “at once” was healed, he takes up his pallet (mattress”) and leaves the pool walking. Once again, Jesus merely speaks the Word, and it changes a life. Vs. 9 also points out that this healing took place on the Sabbath. – Saturday for the Jews.

Vs. 10 - The Jews challenge the man about carrying his mattress on the Sabbath. He is deemed to be working on the Sabbath, and therefore breaking one of the 10 commandments. They did not seem to focus with him being healed, just saw the violation. Odd statement about how we can focus on the negative in life if we choose to, rather than upon our blessings.

Vs. 11 – the man says to them: “the man who healed me said to me to take up my mattress and walk.

Vs. 12 – they again are focused on the breaking of the Sabbath rather than the glorious gift Jesus gave him. He had been lame for 38+ years.

Vs. 13 - As the interrogation of the man continues he is asked “who did this?”. John tells us subtly that Jesus had slipped away. It appears that the man did not know Jesus prior to this healing. Jesus, knowing he was now being hunted, by the very people God chose to be a light unto the Gentiles, left quietly.

Vs. 14 - Jesus finds the man at the temple

Vs. 15 - He tells the man – “See you are well, sin no more”. We have to be very careful here about this verse. It seems to almost be suggesting that his disability was because of his sinful living.

This teaching, that our sickness and disabilities is punishment from God for our sinfulness. This thought was deeply engrained in the Jews. It was suggested by an editor to the Bible known as the Deuteronomistic historian affectionately called “D” by theologians. The old testament actually has 4 such patterns of editing the Old Testament, or 4 theologies if you will.

J- the Yahwist

E – The Elohist

P – the priestly

D – the Deuteronomistic

The Deuteronomistic theology arose mostly as they struggled to deal with a vexing dilemma about their thinking about God. It stems from the fall of the northern kingdom of Samaria and then in 587 BC the fall of Jerusalem. To the Jew the unthinkable had occurred. They were taken into captivity. Each nation had their own national God. The Jews of course felt that Yahweh, their God was supreme and omnipotent. Yahweh was all powerful, so they had to reconcile how did this occur. Either they were wrong about Yahweh being all powerful, or they had to say, God is punishing us for our faithlessness. It is not God who failed, it is we who failed God and he has let us fall. Of course there is some truth in this relational understanding that when we do certain things there are consequences. An example might be heavy smoking. If you smoke like a chimney and get lung cancer, it is not because God is punishing you for your sins. It is because ingesting smoke is a choice you make and we know it can make you sick and kill you. So the Deuteronomistic historian sought to explain the tension that exists, when the Jews try to reconcile the power of God, with their fallen historical circumstances. The prophets of the Old Testament had a similar theme, that the troubles the Jews had were because they had turned away from God to follow the other God's, the Baal's. If only you return to God, you will be fine again. There is truth in that claim. When we stay close to God, we will be in a much better place in our lives. But then there are many instances where this theology does not stand up to reality. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament was included in the Canon to provide a corrective to the D theology. The book of Job is the best example. Job loves God and serves God. But tragedy befalls him. He loses his wealth

and possessions. He loses his family and he rails against God, he takes God on. Why am I suffering so much when I love you? That is the question all must deal with when tragedy strikes. And no matter how much faith you have, you will go through crisis and heartbreak. So why doesn't an all powerful God just bring these tragedies in our lives to an end? Why do people contract cancer? Well science says there are many factors, including genetics, eating habits, stress factors, etc. I am the least qualified to know. Why do some heavy smokers never get lung cancer while others do? This side of eternity, we will never know. The Book of Job attempts to correct the notion that if you have a crisis event or tragedy it is because you are a sinner and must be disobedient to God. Again there is a clear connection between my sinfulness and a consequence that comes from it. If I do drugs, it might kill me. But if I die from doing drugs it is not a punishment from God. It was a choice I made.

Well, I suspect I am already in enough trouble. What are your thoughts about this?