

May 4 | Lesson 10

Healing Water

Focal Passage

John 5:1-15

Background Text

John 5:1-18

Purpose

To affirm that Jesus is the healer who makes us well

John 5:1-15

¹After this there was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ²In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, ³and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there. ⁵A certain man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years.^[a]

⁶When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

⁷The sick man answered him, “Sir, I don’t have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I’m trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me.”

⁸Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” ⁹Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.

¹⁰The Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It’s the Sabbath; you aren’t allowed to carry your mat.”

¹¹He answered, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”

¹²They inquired, “Who is this man who said to you, ‘Pick it up and walk’?” ¹³The man who had been cured didn’t know who it was, because Jesus had slipped away from the crowd gathered there.

¹⁴Later Jesus found him in the temple and said, “See! You have been made well. Don’t sin anymore in case something worse happens to you.” ¹⁵The man went and proclaimed to the Jewish leaders that Jesus was the man who had made him well.

Key Verses: “Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath” (John 5:8-9).

^[a]John 5:3: Critical editions of the Gk New Testament do not include the following addition waiting for the water to move. “Sometimes an angel would come down to the pool and stir up the water. Then the first one going into the water after it had been stirred up was cured of any sickness.

Connect

The first half of the Gospel of John (Chapters 1–11) is often referred to as “The Book of Signs.” Seven clearly distinguishable signs begin with Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding feast at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1-11) and conclude with his resuscitation of his good friend Lazarus (11:38-44). The other five signs include his healing of a royal official’s son (4:46-54), his healing of a sick man at the Bethesda pool (5:1-9), the feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-14), his walking on the Sea of Galilee (6:16-21), and his healing of a blind man (9:1-11).

“Sign” is a special word John used to designate that there was more to these particular acts of Jesus than simply miracles that amazed. Each pointed to something special about Jesus;

each distinguished him from any who came before him or would come after him.

To discerning observers who were well-acquainted with God’s mighty acts recorded in Scripture and whose hearts were open to the movement of God’s Spirit, these acts made it clear that Jesus wasn’t just a miracle worker, rabbi, healer, or friend. He did things only God could do. As surprising as the conclusion must have seemed to his followers as it first took root in them, he was God-in-the-flesh. He was divine.

The biblical key to Jesus’ first miracle is found in the prophet Amos. Amos had declared that a God-ordained day was coming “when the one who plows will overtake the one who gathers, when the one who crushes grapes will overtake the one who sows the seed.” It was a glorious vision of God’s plenty countering the scarcity we contend with. In the days of Messiah, he said, “The mountains will drip wine, and all the hills will flow with it” (Amos 9:13).

Fast forward 750 years. A boy who grew up in Nazareth performed a miracle for friends at a wedding feast. It did not change the world. Yet it made those with eyes to see wonder if the world was under new management. Echoing the words of Amos, John declared that in the days of Messiah Jesus, wine became as plentiful as water. It didn’t just drip from the mountains and flow from the hills. It was so plentiful it was stored in entry hall water jars. Jesus’ first miraculous sign “revealed his glory” (John 2:11).

Similarly, in the two miraculous signs that John linked by placing them back-to-back (John 4:46-54; 5:1-14), Jesus revealed himself to be the dispenser of new life. In the first, from a distance of more than 20 miles, Jesus overcame the certainty of death with a single word; he spoke new truth into existence.

In the second, Jesus authoritatively commanded a man rendered inconsequential by a lifetime of sickness to leave his sickness behind; it no longer held over him any power. In both instances, not only did Messiah Jesus offer new life; as God had done at Creation itself, he “spoke” that new life into being. Indeed, Jesus declared that works such as these were divine “works that the Father has given me to finish.” To those with eyes to see and hearts to receive, they revealed clearly that “the Father has sent me” (John 5:36).

Jesus performed all these and many other signs to enable persons to believe in him. Following the first sign, his disciples “believed in him” (John 2:11). After he healed the royal official’s son, the official “and his whole household believed” (4:53). After he fed the 5,000, the people declared, “This is truly the prophet who is coming into the world” (6:14). When he enabled the blind man to see, the man not only believed but also worshiped Jesus (9:38). After he raised Lazarus from the dead, many Jews “believed in him” (11:45). John included all these signs in the Gospel he wrote so that we “will believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s

Son, and that believing, [we] will have life in his name” (20:31).

Like the sick man at the Bethsaida pool, we can trust Jesus to make us well.

Inspect

Introduction. In Lesson 9, we saw how the water in Jacob’s well, despite being savored by Jacob and his family and his herds, paled in comparison to the living water that Jesus offered a Samaritan woman. The water from Jacob’s well did not quench anyone’s thirst; in short order, people had to return to the well to obtain another drink. But Jesus’ living water becomes in persons a spring that eternally flows into new life.

In this lesson, we see how some people believed that the water in the pool near Jerusalem’s Sheep Gate, when agitated, contained healing qualities. But Jesus, whether agitated or not—and without any use of water—can simply declare to persons that they are healed; and it is so.

The Scripture text from John 5 can be divided into four brief scenes. Verses 1-3 offer details about the pool of water (including its location) at which Jesus performed a healing miracle in Jerusalem.

Verses 5-9 introduce readers to a man at the pool; he had been sick for a long time. They narrate a brief conversation that took place between Jesus and the man, whom Jesus promptly healed, even though it was the sabbath.

Verses 10-13 describe how some Jewish religious authorities converged quickly on the man (presumably headed home with the pallet on which he had been lying), lecturing him that it was not permissible for him to carry his pallet. It was, after all, the sabbath.

Verses 14-15, a postscript, note that Jesus later tracked the man down at the Temple (presumably offering thanks to God for his healing), instructing him also to stop sinning.

John 5:1. The reminder is always apt that the New Testament Gospels do not claim to be biographies of Jesus. The Gospel of John, like the other Gospels, is the proclamation of the glorious news for human beings that has resulted because God took on flesh in Jesus. As such, the Gospel is more akin to a sermon that declares the mighty acts God did through Jesus than a chronological account of Jesus' life.

Why open with this reminder? "After this" is not a chronological note meant to suggest that John 5 followed on the heels of the events recorded in John 4:43-54. Instead, the words convey the meaning, "on another occasion" or "similarly." They tell us that what we're about to read is similar in content to (and thus provides another example of) what we have just read. What we have just read (in 4:54) is that Jesus' healing of the son of a royal official was a sign. The healing recorded in John 5 should also be read as a sign.

The Jewish faith in the first century had three major festivals that encouraged Jews to come to

Jerusalem: Passover (Unleavened Bread), Pentecost (Weeks), and Sukkoth (Tabernacles). In addition, Purim (the salvation of the Jews in Persia [Esther 9:20-32]) and Hanukkah (the rededication of the Temple) were growing in popularity. John offered no details as to which "festival" was taking place.

Verse 2. As was true of many ancient cities, Jerusalem was encompassed by walls to provide a degree of protection. Because Jerusalem was a fairly large city, there were multiple gates in the walls, through which traffic could enter and exit.

Just north of the Sheep Gate in the northern wall (east of the Antonia Fortress) were twin pools, known as Bethsaida ("Bethesda" [KJV, NIV, NASB, *The Message*], "Beth-zatha" [NRSVUE, TEV]). The two pools, surrounded by "covered porches," with another colonnade between them, formed a single complex that was larger than a modern football field.

Known today as St. Anne's because of the large, twelfth-century church built over part of the location, the first-century pools are difficult to visualize. The two pools should not be confused with the Siloam Pool, in which Jesus told a blind man to wash (John 9:7). The Siloam Pool, dating to the time of Hezekiah, is located just inside the southern wall of the Holy City.

Verse 3. Because the pools were 40 feet deep, their intended purpose remains unclear. They may have been ritual bathing pools originally; but by the time of Jesus, the pools had apparently become known as a site at which

medical cures took place (similar to present-day Lourdes in France). Thus, there was at the pools “a crowd of people who were sick.” A century after Jesus, the Roman Emperor Hadrian had a temple (to healing) constructed at the site.

Verse 4. Because this verse (and 7:53–8:11) does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts (many of which were not available when the KJV was produced), most present-day Bible translations exclude it from the biblical text and reduce it to a textual footnote on the page.

Verse 5. Among the sick persons at the Bethsaida pool that day was a Jewish man, probably a resident of Jerusalem, who had suffered with an ailment for 38 years. No details regarding his sickness are provided. Nor is it stated explicitly that he had been at the pool for that entire length of time. There is no compelling reason not to take the 38-year length of time literally; it alerts readers that any realistic hope for a cure for the man had ceased long before. At the same time, the time span can remind readers symbolically that the man had been sick for as many years as the Hebrews had wandered aimlessly in the wilderness after leaving Kadesh Barnea (Deuteronomy 2:14).

Verse 6. On this day, which was a sabbath (verse 9), Jesus noticed the sick man lying near the pool. Each of the Gospels make it persistently clear that Jesus’ skills of observation were uncannily perceptive. John didn’t explain how Jesus knew; he simply stated that Jesus was well-aware that the man had been sick for a “long time.”

Stopping beside the man, Jesus engaged him in conversation. His question to the man was to the point: “Do you want to get well?” Readers may assume that “Yes, of course” is the only sensible answer; but Jesus wisely grasped that being sick can be a comfortable identity and a means to play on the sympathies of others. Restoration to full health would potentially strip the man of not only his identity but also perhaps his livelihood.

Verse 7. The sick man did not exactly answer Jesus’ question. Instead of a simple yes or no, the man pointed out to Jesus that he had no one to “put [him] in the water when it [was] stirred.” Apparently, the persons who placed him at the pool did not stay with him throughout the day, nor was anyone else available to help. As a result, on those occasions when the waters “stirred,” someone else was always able to get into the pool ahead of him.

It is not known what the man was referring to when he spoke of the water being stirred. Perhaps one or both of the pools were spring-fed. Perhaps underground pipes conveyed water to them. Whatever the cause, those congregating near the water apparently believed the healing qualities of the twin pools were activated only when they were stirred and only for one person.

Verse 8. Not interested in the water but in the man, Jesus told him to “get up!” The command surely refocused the man’s attention. The word would not have conveyed any other meaning to him other than its literal injunction to “arise.” But to John’s readers, who knew that

God raised the dead (verse 21; 60 percent of the uses of this verb in the New Testament refer to resurrection), the implications are unmistakable. Before Jesus' next words are even read, they know that a divinely miraculous reshaping of the man's life is about to occur. His life is about to be made new, forever renewed.

Even as the man looked keenly at Jesus, trying to discern how serious he was in telling him, a lame man, to "get up," Jesus followed up his first command with a second that reinforced it: "Pick up your mat and walk." Whether the man felt his limbs strengthen, John didn't say. What he did make clear was Jesus' expectation and his authority. Just as "God said . . . and it was so" (Genesis 1), so "Jesus said" and it was so.

Verse 9. Without any mention of faith in the man, without any use of the supposed healing qualities of the water, with only the authoritative, spoken word of Jesus ringing in his ears, the man became "immediately . . . well." There was nothing else for him to do but to "[pick] up his mat and [walk]." "Just as the thirty-eight years proved the gravity of the disease, so the carrying of the bed and the walking prove the completeness of the cure."¹

Only at this point in the account did John mention that the day on which Jesus performed this miraculous sign was the sabbath. Readers who are even vaguely aware of Jewish sabbath prohibitions will immediately steel themselves for the proverbial "other shoe to drop."

Verse 10. As the formerly sick man walked away, carrying his mat, unspecified Jewish

leaders confronted him (presumably at a location other than the Bethsaida pool). "You aren't allowed to carry your mat" on the sabbath, they told him. A moment's reflection on this encounter (1) raises a question, (2) suggests a need to rethink first-century Jewish sabbath practices, and (3) hints at a probable identity for the Jewish leaders.

The question: Why would a Jewish man, at least middle-aged and probably a resident of Jerusalem, have to be informed about basic sabbath practices?

Second thoughts: First-century Jewish sabbath practices do not appear to have been as straightforward and uniform as we have assumed they were. The moment we entertain this possibility, the notion helps to explain how a crowd of sick people, not to mention Jesus and possibly even some Jewish officials, would have been at the pool on the sabbath in the first place.

The hint: The Jewish sect that would have been most vocal about expecting even the general populace to live according to their understanding of priestly legal codes was the Pharisees, the very group that in other Gospel accounts consistently took exception to the actions of Jesus on the sabbath (Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17; John 9:1-34).

Verse 11. The man's response when he was jumped by the Jewish leaders is completely understandable. At the same time, it is sadly disconcerting. Perhaps he was genuinely confused. Having just been told to pick up his mat

and go (verse 8), now he was being told he wasn't supposed to carry his mat (verse 10). Yet the longer one lingers on his response ("the man who made me well said to me. . .") the more it begins to sound like the excuse-laden responses of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:10-13), the more it feels as if he's trying to evade responsibility for his action by pointing his finger and laying the blame elsewhere.

Verse 12. Aroused by the man's response, the Jewish leaders immediately wanted to know, "Who . . . said to you . . . ?" Looming over their innocent-sounding query was an unspoken one: "Who told you to break the sabbath?" In their eyes, it was bad enough that the man was doing something publicly on the sabbath that they believed was inexcusable. For someone actually to be encouraging persons to disregard time-honored sabbath prohibitions was beyond inexcusable. To them, it was spiritually criminal.

Verse 13. The man, however, could not help them. He had no idea who Jesus was. He'd never before seen him; and after the healing, Jesus simply "slipped away." The man's response makes it sound as if the entire episode was little more than a passing encounter, which was likely true. On his way somewhere (apparently alone), Jesus walked past the Bethsaida pool. As he did so, he spotted in his path the lame man. Stopping momentarily, Jesus engaged the man in a brief conversation; then told him to "get up" and go home. He then turned and continued on his way, perhaps to the Temple.

Verse 14. Whether "later" in the day on the sabbath or sometime the following week is unclear, but Jesus ran into the man "in the temple." The northern gate into the Temple grounds was less than 200 yards south of the Bethsaida pool.

Jesus' "See!" is akin to our "Hey!" It might better be translated here as "Listen up!" Jesus then told the man two things. First, he reinforced what the man already knew. "You have been made well." The healing wasn't temporary; the sickness would not later return.

Second, Jesus warned him to stop sinning, lest "something worse happens to you." It is pointless to speculate as to what sin (or kind of sin) Jesus was referring to. Nor is it clear if "something worse" referred to this life or the next. Presumably, the man understood Jesus who, as noted in verse 6 above, had uncanny insight into the character and concerns of others.

Verse 15. Having learned the identity of Jesus, he reported his discovery to the Jewish leaders. Perhaps their threatening engagement had been dire enough (verse 10) that he hoped to sidestep their ire by offering them the information they had requested (verse 12). Whether the man wanted merely to share his good news with them (he had found out the name of the man who had healed him) or he "ratted" on Jesus in order to save his own skin is unclear. However, when compared to the responses of the blind man whom Jesus would later heal (John 9:17, 25, 27, 30-33), questions linger.

Verses 16-18. To the Jewish leaders, it was all but indefensible that Jesus (in their eyes) encouraged persons to ignore God's sabbath laws. But when he actually defended himself by claiming that he, like God (his Father!), had important providential work to do on the sabbath, their anger and dismay hardened into unmitigated hatred. His teachings were perverse. He had to be stopped. In fact, already they determined that he needed to be killed.

Reflect

Ahead of Time

If you have the *Adult Bible Studies* DVD, preview the segment related to this lesson, and arrange to show it during class.

Carefully read the corresponding lesson in the student book, and highlight statements and questions you can use during your class discussion.

During Class

Begin class with prayer. Consider using the following: *Almighty and compassionate God, your Son Jesus knows our needs before we ever mention them to him. And he's willing to involve himself in the troubles we face even when we don't seem particularly grateful afterward. Grant us this day such a renewed vision of his kindness that gratitude fills our hearts and our mouths cannot stop proclaiming your praise; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

If you have the *Adult Bible Studies* DVD, show the segment related to this lesson.

Ask a class member to read aloud the Purpose Statement for this lesson. Invite a class member to read aloud John 5:1-3.

Say: *Some people in first-century Jerusalem thought a pool of water could dispense health to the ill. Some ballplayers today think if they wear a certain charm or perform a ritual in the correct sequence, they will play a better game.*

Ask: *What curious act, if performed properly, have you believed would bring you luck or fix your troubles? Is there a point at which a lighthearted belief in a totem may suggest a need to address a spiritual issue in one's life?*

If your classroom has a large map of first-century Jerusalem, take time to point out the location of the Sheep Gate, the north city wall, the Bethsaida pool, and the Temple. If not, a map can be downloaded for free from bible.ca/maps/maps-jerusalem-33AD.jpg, printed, and copied for distribution.

Invite a class member to read aloud John 5:5-9. Say: *Sometimes people went to Jesus seeking healing. Sometimes Jesus went to people offering healing.*

Ask: *When has there been a time in your life when you went to Jesus seeking healing? When has there been a time in your life when Jesus came to you offering healing?*

Invite a class member to read aloud the first paragraph in "Jesus Our Healer" in the student book. After pointing out that Jesus was not a resident of Jerusalem, ask: *How do you think he knew that the sick man had been there "a*

long time”? (Although John points implicitly to Jesus’ acute skills of observation, which we might call a kind of divine knowledge, the question is meant to invite class members to imagine themselves into the scene and to describe what they see.)

Allow a few minutes for class members to read “Jesus Our Healer” in the student book. (Note that yet another sabbath healing initiated by Jesus was his healing of a blind man, recorded in John 9.)

Ask the questions at the end of “Jesus Our Healer,” and invite class members to respond. Ask: *What do you take away from the fact that many of the healings Jesus initiated took place on the sabbath?*

Say: *We’ll circle back for another look at first-century Jewish thoughts about sabbath,* but let’s note what the student book writer said about Jesus and his sabbath healings.

From “Jesus Our Healer,” point out that Jesus’ “rationale” for sabbath healings is contained in Mark 2:27; Matthew 12:12; John 5:17; 9:4-5. If sufficient class time is available, as well as Bibles, invite class members to read aloud these verses.

Reread aloud John 5:8-9. Say: *Jesus effectively said, “Do this,” and it was so. His words remind me of a well-known event in the Old Testament.* Ask class members to suggest the event to which you are referring (*God commanded creation to happen [Genesis 1]*)

Say: *The Purpose Statement for this lesson encourages us to recognize and affirm Jesus’*

healing abilities. He had—and still has—divine authority to do so.

Ask: *Are you elated or perturbed that Jesus healed persons who did not exhibit any faith? Why?* (Despite Scripture consistently stating that God’s providence is shared with all persons [Matthew 5:45], many persons lapse into a bad habit of thinking that God’s graciousness is a reward for being good. The question is an invitation for class members to self-reflect and to compare their beliefs to what Scripture actually says.)

Ask the questions at the end of “A Pool for Healing,” and invite class members to respond.

Invite a class member to read aloud John 5:10-13. Ask: *When you were young, what sabbath restrictions or expectations did your family observe on the Lord’s Day?*

Say: *Whatever our thoughts about the actions of the Jewish leaders, and whether or not we attempt personally to keep the sabbath holy (Exodus 20:8-11), let’s acknowledge that sabbath-keeping has been important historically to God and to God’s people.*

If sufficient class time is available, explain that much of what we think and say about Jews in the first century comes from the Talmud, which was compiled and edited centuries later, and consists of the assembled teachings of rabbis, the successors to the Pharisees (and does not include the teachings of priests, Essenes, Christians, or other Jewish sects).

One of the longest tractates in the Talmud offers insightful information on the proper

observance of sabbath. While this information helps persons track the development of Pharisaic influence, we must be careful not to assume that Jewish practices always were as they eventually became. Given what we read in the New Testament, sabbath-keeping in the first century was probably much more diverse than the Talmud portrays it (just as the ways Christians keep sabbath today are diverse).

When John, in verse 9, says that Jesus' healing took place on "the Sabbath," we can almost hear a foreboding film score playing in the background. Every sabbath healing Jesus performed resulted in major controversy with the Pharisees, which suggests strongly that the Jewish leaders in this story were also Pharisees.

Invite a class member to read aloud John 5:14-15. In "Jesus Our Healer," note that the student book writer made another good point about Jesus and water. Like water, Jesus "went to the lowest point." He cared deeply for the lost and those deemed the least.

Allow a few minutes for class members to read "Access to Healing" in the student book. Ask: *Has there been a time in your life when "counting [your] blessings and thinking about others" helped you to relax and trust God to take care of you?*

Say: *The student book writer invites us to reflect on the fact that there are many persons for whom clean water and dependable sanitation facilities—not to mention affordable health care—are little more than a dream. We ended our previous lesson thinking about things we could do as individuals or as a class to make drinking water available to people.*

Ask: *Have you thought any more about this matter? Have you done anything or decided on a course of action to pursue?* Ask the questions at the end of "Access to Healing," and invite class members to respond.

Note that the next lesson, from John 6, will reveal Jesus has authority over water.

Conclude class by asking class members to pray aloud with you the prayer at the end of the lesson in the student book: **Living Lord, wash over us with your healing presence. Wash away the systems that separate people from you and the healing and wholeness you bring. Give all people the ability and agency to participate fully in your healing of creation; in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

¹From *The Gospel According to John*, 2nd Edition, by C. K. Barrett (The Westminster Press, 1978); page 254.