

Hope For The Hopeless

John 5:1-9

Pastor John Miller

It's really hard for me not to cover the whole chapter because it's really one moving narrative, and it's hard for me to not keep going. I'm going to limit it tonight to just the miracle, and then we'll look at the dialogue and the conflict that came after that. Follow with me. Let's read John 5:1-9. "After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market," or sheep gate, "a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. 3 In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. 4 For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. 5 And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him," and this is one of the great questions that Jesus asks in the Bible, "Wilt thou be made whole?" 7 The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me. 8 Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. 9 And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath," which is very significant because it brings Jesus into conflict with the religious community, and it happens intentionally because it will ultimately lead to His crucifixion.

I wonder if you've ever heard the expression: God helps those who help themselves. Have you ever heard that expression? Some have attributed it to Benjamin Franklin, others say that it's in the Bible. I did a little research today about it, and it actually goes back to Greek mythology. It was actually a Greek proverb that goes way back to Greek mythology. There are some who actually believe that it's in the Bible. I had a guy, arguing with me, "It's in the Bible." "No, it's not in the Bible," and he tried to find it but couldn't because, guess what? It's not in the Bible; neither is: A penny saved is a penny earned. That's not in the Bible, either.

The truth is, and we're going to see it in this story tonight—I want you to listen carefully—God helps those who cannot help themselves. And, God helps those who recognize their inability to save or help themselves, and they turn from self and turn to the Savior—they trust in God. God doesn't help those who help themselves. If that were the case, none of us would've been helped, right? God saw us in our hopeless, helpless condition and rescued us. God gives help to the helpless, and He gives hope to the hopeless. In John 5, we find an example of Jesus helping a man who was helpless. Someone described this chapter as: omnipotence meets impotence. What a great description that is. This man was impotent—he couldn't walk, he was lame—so omniscience comes and rescues and saves him.

We come, tonight, to the third miracle in the gospel of John. I mention that because John has seven of them. If you didn't get that when we started the gospel, you need to remember that;

and I'll bring them out as we go through—seven miracles. It's basically the theme of John's gospel, "And many other signs," he calls them. He doesn't call them miracles, he calls them signs, "truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples," but these are recorded in John, "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ...and that believing ye might have life through his name." The entire gospel of John revolves around seven miracles. It has seven "I Am" statements. We're going to see it real clearly in this one, but you've gotta stay with me the next couple of weeks. It's going to take three weeks to get through chapter 5, as the conflict unfolds going through this chapter. What happens is Jesus performs a miracle, the miracle points to His deity (thus Behold Your God), but brings Him into conflict with the Jewish leaders which ultimately leads to His crucifixion upon the cross.

There's another insight that I want to bring out, that is, these first three miracles—the water turned to wine, the nobleman's son, and the man at Bethesda—all picture how God saves sinners. Now, it's an actual miracle, it's an historical event, God did these miracles, but there's a picture behind them. Actually, all the healings that Jesus performed in the gospels remind us of how God saves sinners. Let me explain the first three. Water to wine indicates that we're saved by God's Word. God's Spirit uses God's Word to convict and save us. We're washed with regeneration by the renewing of the Holy Spirit. It spoke of salvation by the Word of God. In the second miracle we looked at last Wednesday night, the nobleman's son, is clearly teaching that we're saved by faith. Now, faith doesn't save us, but it's the hand that reaches out and accepts what God has done for us. We're saved by grace, but it's through faith and the idea of trusting in our Savior.

Tonight we see the man at Bethesda who was lame, picked out and healed by Jesus, shows us how God saves sinners by grace. When you come to salvation, it involves the Word of God, the Spirit of God, faith in God, and the grace of God—coming to trust in God's marvelous grace. This miracle beautifully illustrates Ephesians 2:8-9. I can't believe how often I find myself quoting those verses, and I really believe that all Christians should put them to memory. If you haven't, you need to learn Ephesians 2:8-9. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast." You can add verse 10 to that as well, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

This story that we're going to read (verses 1-9) pictures God saves us by His marvelous grace. Let's look first of all in verses 1-5, where we have the setting or background for the miraculous sign. First of all the time, verse 1, "After this," after the healing of the nobleman's son. The nobleman came to Jesus and said, "Would you come down to my house and heal my son, for he is sick?" Jesus gave him a word, he believed it by faith, and his son was healed. By the way, that was recorded in the area of Galilee. In this section, we now move back down to Jerusalem. Another bit of information, we begin year two in the public ministry of Jesus Christ. When you start John 5, you have had one year in the life and ministry of Jesus. Now, we come to year two, and He does a miracle that is more public than the water to wine, which was at a wedding and just had the wedding guests there, and the nobleman's son, who just had his family and His disciples there. Now, at the pool of Bethesda, He actually heals this man, it's

open for everyone to see, and it brings Him into conflict with the Jewish authorities.

Notice, “After this there was a feast of the Jews,” John doesn’t tell us what feast of the Jews it was. I gotta chuckle because commentaries will go on for pages trying to analyze what feast it might be and come to the end and say, “Oh, well, we really just don’t know anyway.” “Well, why did you waste my time?” I’m not going to waste your time, but there were three annual feasts that were mandatory for every male Jew to attend in Jerusalem, so it’s a good guess that it’s possibly one of them. The first and most often guessed is Pentecost. The second is the feast of Passover, and the other one is Tabernacles. Those three feasts...they would actually be in a different order, though: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. We don’t know what feast but possibly Jesus went down to celebrate this feast, so He came from Galilee back down to Jerusalem in Judea.

It says, “and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.” Even though He was in the north, and headed south to Jerusalem, whenever you go to Jerusalem, you’re always ascending. You’re always going up because it’s the city on the hill. Now we have the place, “Now, there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market,” my King James translation has, and some of your other new modern translations might have “gate,” which is the same thing. It’s referring to the sheep gate where they actually had a market there as well. There was a “pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches,” or patios with porticos. They have unearthed this area. If you go to Israel today and visit it, you can see the archeological digs of these areas and it’s quite fascinating.

The name Bethesda actually means house of mercy. Some think it means house of grace, but most scholars believe that this means house of mercy. The word “Beth” means house, and so you have Bethlehem, house of bread. Bethany is house of figs. I have a daughter named Bethany. It’s a cute name, but I don’t know that it conveys anything all that exciting, house of figs or house of bread. The name here means house of mercy. What a beautiful picture it is that Jesus comes to this man who needs mercy. It’s a picture of how God comes and saves sinners.

In this area where there were these porticos, porches, and these pools, there “lay a great multitude,” John makes it clear there was a whole bunch of sick people, “of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. 4 For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. 5 And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.” I don’t want to get sidetracked, but the challenge of this passage that many people want to question and wonder about is this idea that an angel came down, stirred up the waters, and whoever first stepped into the water was then healed of whatever disease they had.

There’s a lot of mystery behind this statement, and Bible scholars will point out that the end of verse 3, “...for the moving of the water,” and all of verse 4, does not appear in some of the older manuscripts. You may have a modern translation tonight that that’s not in the Bible. Now, does

it belong there? I think it does, and when you get to verse 7, you actually have another reference to the moving of the water, stepping into the pools, and it is clearly in the text and belongs there. It would be out of place if the end of verse 3 and verse 4 did not belong here, but it indicates that there, with all these sick people laid around these pools, had some kind of healing aspect to them. It could've been divine, that God just healed them. It could've been a healing aspect to that angel came down and stirred the water and they were healed. There's just a lot of questions about what was going on here at this time (and it is interesting), but I don't want to focus on that tonight.

I want to focus on the sick (verse 3) and the man (verse 5) that had the affirming for thirty-eight years. Now, as you look at the setting here of the sick folk around these pools, and you see this one individual who is singled out in verse 5, "a certain man...which had an infirmity," it doesn't tell us exactly what was wrong with him. It's commonly believed that he was lame, but he'd been sick for thirty-eight years. Whenever you're sick for a long time, it really gets discouraging. It really gets difficult to live with chronic pain or chronic sickness. In this picture here, we actually, with "a great multitude of impotent folk," we see a picture of sinful, helpless, hopeless humanity. Now, it's a literal story. I'm not trying to spiritualize the text, but it's a reminder of how all of us are sinners. All of us are impotent. All of us are unable to walk in God's ways. All of us are spiritually sick, and we need Jesus to come and to heal us.

Look at what it says. It says, "...a great multitude of impotent folk," we get our word impossible from that word "impotent." It means helpless. So, without God it's impossible for man to save himself. There's some amazing thoughts behind this description of these sick people. It's impossible for us to do anything to enter the Kingdom of God. In Romans 5:6, it says the natural man, "...were yet without strength," and he could not understand the things of God, they're foolishness to him. It is absolutely impossible for man to save himself. It's that simple. You can't save yourself by good works, religious deeds, reformation, baptism, rites or rituals because we're all impotent and lame.

Then, there were the blind. The Bible speaks of our sinful past as being blind in sin. In John 3:3, Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." We're spiritually blind. We can't see or understand the things of God. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul said, "In whom the god of this world," referring to satan, "hath blinded the minds of them...lest the light of the glorious gospel...should shine unto them," and believe. Before you and I became believers in Jesus, we were impotent, we couldn't save ourselves; we were blind, we couldn't see the things of God. You talk to non-Christians about spiritual things, and they think you're crazy, you've lost your marbles, right? They don't see that. They read the Bible and don't see what you see there because God has given you new eyes.

Then, the "halt" is mentioned in the King James translation there in verse 3. Some translations have "lame," which means you cannot walk in the ways of God. You can't walk in obedience to God or in a way that would be pleasing to God. In John 6:44, Jesus said, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him," so we're lame and unable to walk in God's way. I remember, before my conversion, I tried to live the Christian life; and it didn't work. You

cannot live the Christian life on your own strength. Amen? It is impossible. You need God to give you feet to walk in His ways, you need to receive eyes to see His truth, and you need to be able to have strength to walk in obedience to Him.

Notice also there were those that were “withered,” in the King James again, or paralyzed. It could indicate that their hands were paralyzed. They were crippled. They couldn’t do the work of God. In Romans 7:18, it says, “...to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.” You want to do what God wants, you want to obey God, but you don’t have the capacity or the ability.

Notice they were waiting, I like that, in verse 3. They had put their hope in the moving of the water of the pool, so they waited in vain. This man had been waiting for some time. Now, he’d been sick for thirty-eight years, but we don’t know that he’d been at the pool for thirty-eight years. It does seem to indicate that he’d been there some time and hoped that he could be healed. He’d hoped that he could be whole. He’d hoped that he could be restored, but every time the water moved, someone would get there before him, and it was hopeless. Even when Jesus turns to the man (and we’ll get there in just a moment) and says, “Wilt thou be made whole?” Would you like to be made whole? If I were the man, I’d say, “Sure, I would be! Why would you even ask? No, I just like to lay around here with all these weird people all the time.” It’s like going into the hospital and saying, “Would you like to be healed?” “Uh, no. I just like hanging out in the hospital.”

Jesus had a very specific purpose we’ll get to as to why He asks him this question. How many people today put their hope in that which cannot save them. Here we have this man in this hopeless condition waiting for the moving of the water, someone to help him, but he’s lost. He can’t be saved. What a picture that is of humanity when people try to find salvation in religion, in rites, ordinances, being good, or living a good life. It just doesn’t work.

I want you to notice in verse 5, the statement, “a certain man was there,” I love that! There’s many of them, “great multitudes” (verse 3) of impotent folk, but out of all those that were there, the story involves Jesus focusing on one man. There was “a certain man was there,” if you peek at verse 6, “Jesus saw him,” I love that! Here we have a picture of God’s initiative in sovereign elective grace. I want you to listen to me tonight and not freak out, I’m going to balance out what I’m teaching. There are some people that might hear me say “sovereign elective grace” and think, Uh oh, run for your life! He’s a Calvinist. No, that’s not what I am. It is a picture for us and I think it’s a beautiful picture of how God comes to us. We’re impotent, lame, blind, we can’t walk in God’s ways, we put our hope in the wrong things, we’re not saved, and God comes to us!

Lest I forget, real quick, this man didn’t yell out, “Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me!” The man didn’t say, “Could you please heal me? I’ve been lame for 38 years!” Remember when Jesus turned the water into wine? His mother actually came to Jesus and said, “They have no wine.” “Woman, what is that to do with Me? Mine hour has not yet come.” Then, she told the servants, “Whatever He tells you to do, do it.” He was approached by His mother.

Remember when Jesus healed the nobleman's son? How did that happen? The nobleman came to Jesus and said, "Jesus, would You please come down and heal my son?" He was beseeching Jesus to come. It was a begging and pleading. It was in the present tense and spoke of earnestness. Here's something different. The man's just sitting there. He didn't call out. He doesn't know who Jesus is. Through this whole story, he still doesn't even know who Jesus is. Jesus heals the dude, he walks off with his bed, and he still doesn't know who Jesus is. This is pretty amazing!

I don't know about you, but when I look back at my conversion, God came to me. You know, in our natural state we don't really seek God? We don't really pursue God? If you're pursuing God, it's because God has first pursued you. It's because God has convicted you, and God is drawing you by His Holy Spirit. When I found myself coming to God, it was almost like, "What is happening to me? What is going on with me? This is just amazing!" I found myself reading the Bible, praying, turning to God, and it's like I wanted to pinch myself, "Is this really happening to me?" It was just God, by His sovereign grace, drawing me to Himself. Many times what brings us to that place is a sickness, a problem, a tragedy in our lives, and then God comes to us in our hour of need. He reveals Himself to us.

I believe that this miracle beautifully pictures God's initiative in salvation, and that He saves us by His grace. In Romans 9:15-16, Paul says, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 16 So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy." God, for some reason, chose to save you. God, for some reason, chose to save me. Don't get to thinking that He saved you because you're talented or good-looking or you're charismatic or wonderful and God said, "I really need them on My team," because the Bible says, "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise," right? If God's chosen you, He said, "There's a foolish thing that I can be glorified through. I'm going to use My power to be manifested in this person's life." Write down Ephesians 1:4 where it says God "hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world." You don't have to resist or fight that. I believe that it's taught in the Bible that if you're saved, your salvation is all of God.

Now, we're going to see our part in just a moment, but still notice in verse 6, three things: Jesus saw him, knew him, and spoke to him. It says, "When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time...he saith unto him," so He saw him, He knew him, and then He spoke to him. Isn't that beautiful? Do you know that God saw you and that He knew you? He knew what you had gone through and who you were and then He spoke to you? The story is told of an old Indian after living many years in sin was asked about his conversion. To illustrate it, he actually picked up a worm, gathered together a pile of dry leaves, and laid this worm in a pile of dry leaves. He then took a match and ignited the leaves. As the fire leaped up around this worm, he then reached down and picked the worm up and pulled it out of the fire. He said, "Do you want to know how I was saved? I was a worm and going to hell. God plucked me out of the fire!" I thought, What a great testimony! That guy's a theologian, is what it is. That God reached down and saved a wretch like me! In John 5:21, it says, "...even so the Son quickeneth whom he will." Isn't that cool? It speaks of God's elective, sovereign will in saving

us.

I want you to notice as well, that Jesus then asks a question. In verses 6-9, we have the healing; in verses 1-5, you have the helpless; in verses 6-9, you have the Healer; and He starts by asking a question, "Wilt thou be made whole?" The questions that Jesus asks in the Bible are always fascinating and interesting to me. Some day, Lord willing, I want to do a sermon series on the questions that Jesus asks in the Bible. You might think in the natural, Well, that's kind of a crazy question? The guy's been sick for thirty-eight years, and Jesus asks him, 'Do you want to be made whole?' Jesus knew what He was doing. His question had a purpose.

Believe it or not, there are many people that don't want to be made whole. There's a lot of people that don't want Christ. They don't want to be transformed by His power. They don't want to get saved. They don't want God in their lives. Really, the question for us here tonight, every one of us—saved or unsaved—is: Do you want to be made whole? Do you want to be restored? Do you want to be forgiven? Do you want to have eternal life? Do you want to be whole? Do you want to be all that God has called you to be? It's a beautiful question that God, I believe, wants us to answer.

Many people don't see their need. If you said, "Would you like to be made whole?" "What do you mean, made whole? I'm fine. I don't know about you. I'm not a sinner. I don't need God. I'm enjoying my life. I'm okay." A lot of people don't see their need to be made whole or they know they are sinners, but they love their sin. I meet people all the time, "I know Jesus died for me. I know that I'm a sinner, but I really like sinning right now. I'm enjoying my sin. It's pleasurable." You know, sin is pleasurable for a season. It won't last very long because the Bible says, "For the wages of sin is death," and satan comes to kill, steal, and to destroy. Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."

I'll never forget the night I came home from a party. My mom could tell that I was under the influence. I went to my room and kind of pushed her away. She opened the door and came to me and said, "John, until you give your heart to Jesus, you'll never be happy," and she messed me up so bad. From that day forward, I couldn't enjoy my sin anymore. It haunted me, "Until you give your heart to Jesus, you'll never be happy." I tried, but it didn't work! I couldn't be happy. There are a lot of people that want their sin. They don't want God in their lives, and if you were to ask them tonight, "Would you be made whole?" "No, no. I don't need God in my life." Maybe they don't want to be made whole because they're afraid. Many times people don't come to God because they're afraid of what God will do in their lives. I grew up in church, and I was afraid that if I became a Christian, that God would give me a Christian haircut, put a skinny tie and suit on and stick me in a pew, and I would be miserable the rest of my life! That's what it meant to be a Christian. If you were a Christian, don't smile, don't have fun, you know, don't have a good time anymore, you just have to be miserable. How deceived was I! Jesus said He came to give us life abundantly.

Sometimes people say, "I don't want to be made whole. I'm too busy. I don't want to mess with it. I don't want to take the time," or "I'm too young," I've heard that. "I'm too old," or "I'm too

middle-aged," or "I'm too sinful." A lot of people say, "Well, I can't be made whole, I've been sick for thirty-eight years. I've been sick a long time. I've been waiting here and nothing's ever happened. Someone always gets ahead of me, and I've never been healed." So, they have no hope and can't be healed. Jesus is asking you tonight the same question: Will you be made whole? For you, as a Christian, God wants to make you whole. There's a lot of people that have saved souls but wasted lives. Maybe, even as a Christian, you're still struggling with some besetting sin in your life. You know, God wants to set you free. He wants to break those chains and set you free. He can make you whole tonight. Maybe you're not a Christian. He can forgive your sins. He can take that root of bitterness out of your heart. Maybe you're struggling with unforgiveness and God wants to give you victory tonight. Jesus is asking and doing for this man as He wants this man's life to be transformed, and He wants ours to be transformed as well.

The question implied some things, and I want you to think about this. It implied human responsibility, "Wilt thou be made whole?" You say, "Well, Pastor John, you really got me confused because just a moment ago you said the man was saved by God's sovereign elective purposes, that God took the initiative. He did, but you still have a free will. You still have to choose to believe in Jesus Christ. You have to be willing to be made whole. God's not going to violate your free will, so there's an indication here, it's implied, "Will you be made whole?" Look at verse 24 real quickly, we'll get there probably in a couple of weeks. In verse 24, Jesus said, "Verily, verily," or truly, truly, "I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life." I turned there because I wanted you to see, "...believeth on him," you must believe on Jesus Christ. When Jesus says, "Wilt thou be made whole?" your part, your responsibility, is to put faith in Jesus and to believe on Him. When you do that, you have everlasting life, you are not going to come into condemnation, and you actually pass "from death unto life."

Look at John 5:40. It says, "And ye will not come to me," Jesus says, "that ye might have life." Notice the little statement, "you will not." Here we have man's responsibility or man's free will. You say, "Okay, well, which is it, Preacher boy? Is it my responsibility or God's?" Salvation is all of God, but God will not violate your free will. You must repent, you must believe, you must trust in Jesus Christ. The question also exposes human inability. Notice in verse 7 he says, "I have no man," I have no one to help me. It kind of indicates where the man's faith was, too, by the way. He was looking for someone to help him. Many times we look to people rather than looking to God. God only can help and bring this man healing. It must be God's grace.

Jesus asked the question so he would face his inability. It's so important that we understand that, and notice that his answer exposed the object of his hope and faith. It was in himself, "I have no one to help me when the water is stirred," and it was in the pool, to get into the pool and be healed. There are many people today that have faith in the wrong object. You've heard me say before that it's not the amount of your faith that matters, it's the object of your faith that matters. This man needed to put his faith in Jesus Christ. What happens now in verse 8 is Jesus gives a command. It goes from the question to the command, "Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." It's really three, not just one. First, get up; second, roll up your

bed; and three, walk. Now, this man has been lame for thirty-eight years, and Jesus gives him a command. The man responds in faith believing what Jesus said, and the Lord heals this man. Notice it in verse 9, "And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked," and John says, "and on the same day was the sabbath."

In Acts 17:30, it says, God "...commandeth all men every where to repent." Now, let me give you a principle: God never commands us to do something but what He gives us the ability to do it, right? When Jesus told the man, "Get up," he was able to get up. "Roll up your bed," he rolls up his bed. "Walk," and he started walking. He didn't need any physical therapy. No doubt his legs had atrophied. He hadn't walked for years, yet immediately he was strengthened. His healing was instantaneous and total. It wasn't progressional. He didn't kind of wobble for awhile and think, I need some physical therapy and someone to hang on to. He just got up, rolled his bed, and walked off. When Jesus makes us whole, He does a good job. Amen? "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become," brand, "new." The healing was immediate and complete. It wasn't partial. What a glorious truth that is!

Maybe tonight you're crippled. Maybe tonight you're lame. Maybe tonight you're blind. Maybe you're crippled with fear. Maybe you're crippled with hatred or anger, lust, greed, or unforgiveness. The question the Lord wants you to answer tonight is: Will you be made whole? Will you be made whole? Jesus sees, Jesus knows, and Jesus calls. I wouldn't just pass off this story tonight. Let God speak to your own heart, "Will you be made whole? Will you be set free from your unforgiveness? Would you be set free tonight from your greed, hatred, lust, or anger? Would you be set free tonight from some besetting sin that has had you shackled? Jesus speaks to you tonight to get up, roll up your mat, and walk. Whatever God commands us to do, God will give us the ability to do it. Amen?

This miracle was on the Sabbath day, and that's what happens next. It bring Jesus into conflict with the religious community. Why did He heal on the Sabbath day? Because He wanted people to understand that God created the Sabbath for man because God wants to heal us, God wants to forgive us, God wants to help us. It's not to be a thing of bondage or legalism, but it's a thing where God wants to bring healing. Let's bow our heads in a word of prayer.