

John's Map.¹ (slide.1)

We're using this first part of the year to look at the signs and statements of Jesus found in John's Gospel. As Mark noted last week, we're doing so in order to see how each of these signs/miracles and each of these "I am" statements reveal something about Jesus as the full manifestation of God's glory—not simply as a wise teacher or a good example, but as God Himself. Last week, Mark walked us through the story of the healing of an official's son. Today we're looking at another healing, the healing of a man by the pool of Bethesda. As always, we'll take our time and walk through the text. As we do that, we'll consider how this story might connect to our own lives even now. Erik already read our verses, so let's begin by looking to our Lord in prayer (slide/black.2).

A number of years ago, I attended a conference. The conference was held on a college campus. And because the seminars and workshops that were part of the conference were spread throughout the campus grounds, we were given a map. *But the map was selective.* Outline drawings of all of the buildings were depicted on the map, but only those that housed the actual seminars and workshops were highlighted and named. I'm sure the school had a library and faculty offices. I'm sure there were administration buildings and storage facilities. But the map was not there to show us everything. Instead, the map had a specific purpose in mind.

So we look at John's Gospel and we see the Apostle doing something similar. He has a very specific purpose in mind, and because of that he's being selective. John is not telling us everything Jesus said and did. In fact, he admits as much at the end of his Gospel. At the very last verse of his very last chapter, he writes that (slide.3): *"Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."* I always get a kick out of that last verse. Here's John. He opens (slide.4) his Gospel with some of the most beautiful over-the-top poetry you'll ever read, and then ends (slide.5) his Gospel with the sheer glee that sounds like the closing statement of a high school book report. But what's John doing? He's drawing a map; he's setting up a series of markers and signposts and highlights to take us through the story of Jesus. And in doing so, he's focusing, not on everything, but on only seven specific signs that occurred prior to Christ resurrection. (For the record, the Gospel of Mark mentions more miracles and signs in the first two chapters of his Gospel than John does in his entire book.) So why does John narrow his scope? He tells us why in the passage Mark read a couple of weeks ago. John writes that (slide.6), while Jesus

did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, he wrote what he wrote so those reading might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we might have life in His name. John is telling his readers that he chose these specific signs so they might evoke faith, the kind of faith that will lead to eternal life (slide/black.7).

The Healing.

Our chapter opens (slide.8) with Jesus traveling to the city of Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. There in the city (slide.9), at the north wall of the temple, was an opening called the Sheep Gate, and near the Sheep Gate was a pool called (slide.10) Bethesda ("house of mercy"). The pool was used to wash dirt and filth off of sheep before they were taken into the temple for sacrifice.² But it was also a place where those who were ill would sit and wait with the hope that they might be healed. You see, there was a belief that the water in this pool was magical. Whenever the waters bubbled up, the first one to jump into the pool would be cured of whatever ailment he or she was suffering. Sort of like a "Mega-Millions-Powerball-Healing-Lottery." Now, to be sure, the upper classes and religious leaders wishing to stay ritually pure would have certainly avoided this filthy pool and all the people surrounding it, but not Jesus.³

We're told that Jesus (slide.11) goes to Bethesda and what does He see? He sees a man lying on a mat. He approaches the man and asks him a question. He asks, *"Do you want to be healed?"* The man says (slide.12), *"Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. While I am going, another steps down before me."* Jesus says to him (slide.13), *"Get up, take your bed and walk."* And the man is healed on the spot and takes his bed and walks.

We're also (slide.14) told that this healing happened on the Sabbath (which seems to have been Jesus' favorite day of the week to heal). Some Jewish leaders see the man carrying his bedroll. They stop him and tell him that he's not allowed to do that on the Sabbath. The healed man explains that the person who healed him told him to take his bed. The Jewish leaders ask (slide.15), *"Who told you to do that?"* The man replies that he isn't sure. Jesus left before he had a chance to get His name.

Now, for the record (slide/black.16), there is no law in the OT that says that it's illegal to carry your bedroll on the Sabbath. There is a passage in the book of Jeremiah that speaks against unnecessary loading and unloading on the Sabbath day, but the context that passage focuses more on transport that is excessive than the simple movement of one's personal property from one place to another.⁴ The man in our story was not guilty of violating the OT, but he was guilty of breaking

one of the many, many man-made rules and regulations that were added to the OT law by the Jewish leaders of the day. There were a lot of them. Rules which prohibited the tying of a knot on the Sabbath, or the loosening of a knot, or the making of more than one loop with a rope, or the sewing of more than one stitch with thread, or the writing of more than one letter with pen and ink, or (as in our case here) the moving of something from one spot to the next."⁵ It's crazy. Jesus miraculously heals a man, but all the religious leaders can see is an infraction of one of their rules.⁶

I suppose you and I can do the same in our own lives. We can imagine a list of extra-biblical "dos and don'ts" that, if kept in just the right way, will somehow magically exonerate us, and make us okay, and free us from all difficulty. But the gospel is very different from that. And it has everything to do with Jesus, and not with us.

Eventually (slide.17), Jesus catches up with the man He healed. He tells him that he's now well. He also tells him to (slide.18) "sin no more, so nothing worse may happen to [him]." That is a tricky passage and one that has produced unfortunate condemnation and guilt in the lives of many. Now it *may* be that the man was injured because of reckless things he had done in the past; we're not really told.⁷ But later in this same Gospel, Jesus also makes it very clear that suffering is not a guaranteed index of a person's sins.

Verse 15 (slide.19) tells us that the man then told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who healed him. Some argue that in doing so, the guy was betraying Jesus and throwing Him under the bus. But as best as we can tell, the man was simply answering the question he was previously asked and was giving credit where credit was due.⁸ (slide/black.20)

Our Need For Grace.

So what do we know about this guy? In truth, not a whole lot. We don't know his name. We don't know where he's from. We don't know who his parents were or how he was injured. But here's what we do know with certainty. We know that he is not the hero of the story. In fact, as we look at the stories of each of the people connected to the seven signs recorded in John's Gospel, not one of them is the hero of their story. In fact, if there is anything these seven signs have in common, it's that. *But especially this guy!*

Last week, Mark told the story of the healing of the official's son. That story was different from today's story. After all, we're told in that story that the official *heard* about Jesus, and *traveled* to see Jesus, and *begged* Jesus, and he *implored*, and did so *repeatedly*. There was clear activity on the part of this official. And yet, even that does not make the official the hero of his story. Yet all the more so with our guy lying beside the pool at Bethesda. No prayer, no petition, no request. Nothing at all. Instead, all we see a man who has already fabricated his plan for healing. A man who cannot see past the water as his healing agent.⁹ Yet Jesus comes to him, and asks the questions, and He takes the initiative.

You see, as Mark shared last week, it is God's grace, and only God's grace, from beginning to end. That's true in each and every one of the seven stories John highlights in his Gospel. But that's also true for each and every one of us. The only hero of our story can be Jesus. Anything else will fall miserably short. And yet we live in a world that constantly wrestles against that idea. Sometimes even with the church.

There's a guy; his name is (slide.21) Luc Ferry. Ferry is a philosopher at the University of Paris. He's not a believer (he would see himself more as an agnostic). But even though he's an agnostic, he argues that every system of thought out there (whether religious or not) is an attempt to produce salvation. Not everyone would use the word "salvation," but Ferry argues that that is exactly what's going on. Everyone's trying to save themselves. And if you flip through your smartphone—if you read blogs and articles, if you listen to podcasts or watch Instagram or YouTube videos—you can see what he means. It might be called "self-improvement/personal development," but according to Ferry, each and every one of these things are (slide.22) "doctrines of salvation" (that's his term).

So he argues that there are two basic techniques/approaches people use to produce this salvation. The first is a more ancient/religious approach (though it does not necessarily have to be religious). So (slide.23) here you are. And (slide.24) here's this idea/system of thought. And the thinking is that through self-discipline and industry you exercise your will, and you control your passions, and you submit to the rules/technique, and you (slide.25) become a better you. And from this comes "salvation." And even though it is a more *traditional* approach, new versions of this pop up every single day.

The other approach (slide/black.26) is a more modern/contemporary approach. It begins (slide.27), not with an idea/system of thought that's "out there." Rather, it begins "in here." It begins by looking (slide.28) deep down inside—deep down into your emotions/desires, and you see these emotions and desires, and you pick one (slide.29). You pick one that you think is the strongest.

And to *trust* that emotion. You trust that *this* is who you really are; *this* is your true identity; this is the real you. And then you (slide.30) live out of that emotion in the name of being "true to yourself." And, again, we see a lot of this in our day and age.¹⁰

If the (slide.31) first approach is more *external*, the second approach is more *internal*.
If the first approach is more *objective*, the second approach is more *subjective*.

But the way of the gospel is neither one of these (even Luc Ferry admits as much). Jesus does not show up on the scene and say (slide.32), "Believe in what feels right, believe in what is deep down inside of you and you'll be okay." But nor does Jesus simply say (slide.33), "Believe this set of rules, believe in a set of principles and you'll be okay." After all, Jesus does not show up on the scene and say, "I'm here to show you how to find God; believe in this set of techniques and you will find salvation." Rather He says (slide/black.34), "I am God who has come here to find you; believe in Me and you will be saved."¹¹

But that's hard for us. It's infinitely easier for us to fabricate a way of salvation that depends upon religion or depends upon our own subjective imagination, but Christ comes and speaks clearly as he declares that He is, not just another good idea, but is God Himself. God who took on flesh and died so we might live, and rose from the dead so we might live forever. I love how Ern Baxter put it. He asks this question (slide.35):

Have you ever noticed how inevitable Jesus is? You just can't get rid of Him. You may not like Him, but you have to deal with Him. (slide.36) Now no one has to take a stand on Socrates. Most people today could not care less what you think of Socrates—or Plato, or Aristotle, or Abelard, or Spinoza, or Schopenhauer. But Jesus is different. The minute you mention Jesus, people either become very antagonistic—or they melt.¹²

As we (slide/black.37) read earlier in our service, our Lord reigns, and sits between the cherubim. He is great is Zion, and exalted over all the nations. He's the true Sheep Gate, the true Lamb of God. The true Bethesda, the true house of mercy. The true and living water, the one who washes us of our sin and brokenness. The true and living Lord of the Sabbath, the one who gives us rest. As we sang today, we set our hope on Jesus. Our rock, our only trust. The one who set His heart upon us first. I love how the poet Carl Sandburg put it; he wrote that (slide.38), "*There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.*"¹³ And both are true (slide/black.39). We're marvelous; we're goofy. We're wonderful;

we're silly. But our ideals, and our convictions, and our faith have nowhere to happen but here. These are not ideas for textbooks and whiteboards. Rather, it has to find application among the real people who populate our daily experience—both inside and outside of these doors. It has to put on flesh, it has to become real; it has to become incarnational.

Let's pray.

¹ OT reading: Ps 99:1-5 (NIV).

² Michael Card, *John: The Gospel of Wisdom*, BIS (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 76; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 178.

³ Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT, 178.

⁴ *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible*, ed. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1709.

⁵ Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 149-50.

⁶ Card, *John*, BIS, 79.

⁷ Gary M. Burge, *John*, NIVAC, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 175; George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 74.

⁸ See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 306; F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 126; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 243.

⁹ M. Craig Barnes, "Healing Our Despair" (lecture Chautauqua Institution, 2023); Köstenberger, *John*, BETNC, 180;

¹⁰ Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 6, 93, 112-114; Timothy Keller, "Changed Lives" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2016).

¹¹ Keller, "Changed Lives" (2016).

¹² Ern Baxter, "Which Jesus?" (sermon, Tampa Covenant Church, 1989).

¹³ Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 27.