

Troubling the Waters

Introduction

Traveling with the Master was always an adventure, and many times it involved mysteries that left us wondering. One of the most interesting and puzzling experiences was the time that He led us down to the pool of Bethesda¹. When it was all over, I had to think for a while about why He did things the way He did. It was more important to Him, I think, that I arrived at my own conclusion than if He just told me why.

It was during one of the Jewish festivals, and we were just following Jesus as usual. Our interest was piqued when we arrived in the midst of the crowd of blind, lame, and paralyzed people that were waiting for a special appearance of the Spirit of God that would stir the water of the pool. The legend was that whoever first entered the pool at that time would be healed of whatever malady that plagued them. I was curious to see what the Lord would say about this, to see if He considered the healings to be real, and if the “stirring” by an angel was sanctioned by God.

I did not believe that the idea of “the first one in would be healed” was in line with the way God worked, especially as Jesus continually spoke to us about the “last being first²”. It did not sound fair to me. It involved the one who least needed help (or who was most able to act) getting the benefit of healing. Jesus said that He came for those who were really sick (and knew it³). So, I looked forward to learning the truth about the pool.

It was clear that many believed about the healing properties of the pool, and the special dispensation of power that came with that healing. But I wasn’t sure if there had actually been anyone that had been truly cured there. Actually, I would have been a little bit worried about some creature being in the pool if I saw unexplained ripples in the water!

All of the invalids at the pool were excited about the possibility that the water would be disturbed. They were waiting for it; they were ready, watchful, and eager. Though they were led to still water⁴ I could imagine the mad chaotic rush for the water if it was ever stirred. But I remembered that God is a God of order, not of confusion⁵. I could also imagine that someone healthy enough to jump in the pool could claim to be healed⁶, and who could really argue with them? The disappointment of those left in the dust would be so great!

The word “stirring” makes me think of a call to action. We all want to experience a “stirring” such as the tongues of flame which occurred at Pentecost⁷, but the Teacher warned many times that it is a wicked generation that seeks after a sign⁸.

There were those of the religious leadership who were at the pool as well. I wondered how they felt about the stirring – did they advocate this as a blessing from God? Were they there to monitor the healing and perhaps rejoice in it? Likely they were only there because they were tracking the activities of Jesus.

The Invalid

Though here were many there who were infirm, Jesus took note of a man who had been a cripple for thirty-eight years⁹. The man must have had friends who carried him to the pool every morning and took him home every night. But these friends could not stay around all day long to help him into the pool should the stirring occur. This man believed in the stirring phenomenon – indeed it was his only hope (he evidently did not know about Christ). I think about how long he had waited for a miracle¹⁰. He was hopeful in an apparently hopeless situation. Perhaps he had actually been present when stirrings had occurred.

The idea of the stirring was very impersonal, and I compared this with the approach of Christ in this instance. He came right up to the invalid, perhaps because someone had told Christ about him. It seemed that Jesus always went to those who were the worst off, not those who were the strongest: He went to sinners, to those in need of a doctor³. This man needed a miracle (getting in the water first) to obtain the healing miracle.

It seemed that Christ had the man to himself. Perhaps He stirred the waters a bit as a misdirection, causing the attention of everyone else there to be drawn to the water. Jesus, in talking to the man, made no comment on the reason that the man was lying there by the pool – he did not mock the tradition of the stirred waters. He asked the man a most amazing question, considering how long the man had been unable to walk. He asked him if he wanted to get well!

The Healing

The man did not answer Jesus directly, but just explained why he could not take advantage of the healing power. Perhaps he thought Jesus might be there to help him into the water. But his expectations were certainly exceeded! Jesus did not announce that He would heal the man, nor did He even mention healing. He just told the man to stand up, take up his bed, and leave. And instantly the man was cured and did what Jesus said, walking away from all of the other invalids.

I wondered about all of the others that were not healed. Jesus picked this man out of a crowd – he was probably the one at the bottom of the heap... the least able to get help. Jesus slipped in without disrupting the others, who likely did not even miss this cripple. Though there were many healings by Jesus at various times and in various places, but He did not heal everybody, every time¹¹.

The Reaction of the Jewish Leaders

The Jewish leaders were there to monitor the activities of Jesus, not to help those in need. Seeing that this was the Sabbath, they quickly condemned the man who was so recently made whole from a lifetime of limitation. Instead of rejoicing in the obvious power of God, they quoted the law and accused him of disobedience. In the midst of their righteous indignation, Jesus faded away from their notice.

The man attempted to justify his actions by explaining that the man that had healed him had told him to take up his bed and walk. It was clear that the man considered someone who healed his infirmity as having more authority than the Jewish leaders. The leaders asked who had healed him, as though they had not witnessed it. But the man could not point Jesus out, for He had slipped away. I wondered if the man felt abandoned by the man who had so changed his life.

The Reunion

Overjoyed, however, he went to the temple to celebrate with God his great blessing. He had begun with hope at the pool and ended with worship at the house of God. He chose this action first rather than going home or showing himself to his friends.

This is where Jesus found him and reconnected with him. The miracle of healing was not directly mentioned; rather Jesus told him to stop sinning. This was not an unusual request by Jesus, but I wondered just what kind of sinful life an invalid could have had¹². Jesus made the point to him that there were worse things than being crippled.

At any rate, the man went to the Jewish leaders to tell them that Jesus was the one who had made him well and who had told him to carry his mat away from the pool. I was amazed at his boldness – but then he had come face to face with the power of God. I expected the leaders would cast him out of the synagogue for telling this truth.

Before his healing, the man was not able to do good actively, he could only receive good in the form of help from others. Afterwards he had to support himself and had opportunities and the responsibility to do good to others. (Perhaps this is why Jesus wanted to make sure the man knew what he really wanted.) I would like to think that in his new freedom he helped others at the pool of Bethesda (friends he had made through their common need).

Afterword

The more I thought about this very intriguing incident, the more I thought that this was a lesson about the continual and personal Presence of God, that He is always there with us no matter what happens to us. This Presence is one of the absolute Promises of God (as well as Love, Truth, and other things). The greatest evidence of this Presence is that Christ came for us – somewhat like how he came for the cripple (and even came back for him). He meets our true needs.

God is always with us, not only at special times of “stirring”. Though He made many signs for the people of Israel, including a pillar of fire and cloud, to show His Presence, I realized that we must be able to sense the Presence of God without such a special demonstration.

Part of the problem, though, is that we tend to look for a certain manifestation of God. As with the cripple by the pool, God was there, but He showed Himself in an unexpected way¹³. It was not in the stirring of the waters, but in Jesus the Son of God. There are many misdirections that we must watch out for¹⁴; and we must adjust our expectations to sense the real and personal Presence of God. And the stirring that we are looking for needs to occur within us¹⁵.

I was able to learn a great lesson from this incident; however, I never did learn the truth about the pool!

1. The name of the pool, Beth hesda, means either house of mercy or house of grace. In both Hebrew and Aramaic the word could also mean "shame, disgrace". This dual meaning may have been thought appropriate, since the location was seen as a place of disgrace due to the presence of invalids, and as a place of grace due to the granting of healing. [Wikipedia]
2. Matthew 19:30, Matthew 20:16
3. Matthew 9:2
4. Psalm 23:2
5. 1 Corinthians 14:33a
6. ... perhaps not unlike today's television "healers"
7. Acts 2
8. Matthew 12:39
10. We have all had times when we were waiting for something critical to occur in our lives.
9. The average lifespan of men at that time was about 40 years
11. The New Testament is full of Jesus' healings, but He didn't heal everybody, every time. At the pool of Bethesda where Jesus healed a cripple, the healed man walked out of the place past all the prone bodies of the other invalids. Catherine Marshall
12. Perhaps he wished each day at the pool that everyone would fall over each other and he could be the first into the stirred waters.
13. Think of how God revealed part of Himself to Elijah as a powerful wind, an earthquake, a fire, and then a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:11-13).
14. Matthew 24:23: "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it." Also the history of the Israelites and the warning from God not to follow false gods.
15. Psalm 45:1a: "My heart is stirred by a noble theme ..."