

THE POOL OF BETHESDA

John 5:1-16

The teachers should read the account of the Lord's second miracle in Galilee in John 4:43-54 and tell the classes about it after the review of the last lesson. There is a suggestion in John 2:23 that the Lord may have performed miracles in Jerusalem when He went down for the Passover, and this is borne out by John 4:45. John also tells of a cleansing of the temple in that first visit (John 2:13-16). These first chapters of John show us that the Lord went back and forth between Judea and Galilee frequently.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord works in us through the knowledge of the Word in our minds.

The knowledge of the Word which we gain in childhood is our "pool of Bethesda."

This knowledge is stirred up in our minds whenever we really recognize one of our faults and sincerely want to correct it.

When one fault is cured, we must go on to fight others. As we go on, we discover deeper and deeper evils in our hearts, but this should not discourage us. It means that we are making spiritual progress.

Notes for Parents

The Lord had gone to Jerusalem for another of the great feasts. About the year 1888, men making repairs in one of the ancient Christian churches in Jerusalem, a church located near what was known as the "sheep gate," found under the crypt a pool. Further excavation discovered a five-arched portico, on the walls of which were faded frescoes portraying the miracle of our chapter. So evidently this pool was known in the early Christian Church to be the pool of Bethesda.

The story is told only in the Gospel of John. This is the third lesson we have had in this Gospel involving water, which we know is one of the symbols of truth. Water gathered into a pool represents truth gathered in the memory. The pool of Bethesda near the sheep gate in Jerusalem symbolizes knowledge of the Lord and of what is true and right—knowledge which is lying in our memories as a result of the teaching we received in our innocent childhood. We may perhaps think of the five porches as our five senses through which that knowledge has come to us and been impressed upon us.

Who are the sick people who lie around this pool waiting to be healed? Are we not all sick—spiritually—in various ways? We know that we all have faults and that there is always some particular fault of which we are immediately conscious. If we really want to get rid of this fault, the angel of the Lord—the spirit of the Lord working through our conscience—comes down and “troubles” the water in the pool. The truth in our memory is stirred up, and if we are quick to see and apply it, our fault can be cured.

But we all have deeper evils within us, too. We recognize and acknowledge them, but we are likely to think they are too strong for us. We say, “I can’t help it; I was born that way.” This is the impotent man who had had his infirmity for thirty-eight years and who was never quick enough to get into the pool when it was troubled. We need to see that the Lord is standing beside us looking into our hearts. And what does He say?

First He asks, “Wilt thou be made whole?” Do you really want to be a thoroughly good person? Then if you do, “Rise, take up your bed, and walk.” Do not just lie there thinking how helpless you are. You know enough of what is right to overcome this evil if you have the will to do it. Later when the Lord met the man in the temple, He said to him: “Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.” We must never let ourselves think that because we have conquered one temptation, we are perfect. As long as we are in this world, we are to go on seeing and fighting deeper and deeper evils within ourselves. This is the way we grow spiritually. It is the purpose of our whole life and

our daily challenge. But the Lord is always there to help us.

Primary

Mention the second miracle to the children and then read the lesson for the day, which needs no long introduction. This is a lesson from which a spiritual meaning may be drawn even for little children. They can understand that when they are naughty, it shows that there is something wrong with their souls which needs to be cured. Stress our part in the healing of both our bodies and our souls--the necessity of really wanting to be well and of making an effort ourselves.

Our lesson finds the Lord again in Jerusalem. He had been back to Galilee and had performed another miracle there, healing the son of a rich nobleman. Then He returned to Jerusalem for another of the feasts.

What pool was near the sheep gate in Jerusalem?

How many porches did it have?

Who were gathered around this pool?

What happened to the pool every once in a while?

What happened to the sick person who first stepped in after the water was troubled?

You know that when you are sick, you are likely to feel very sorry for yourself. You want to be waited on all the time and you keep calling your mother from her work to do things for you--often things you do not really need at all. People who have had a long sickness sometimes enjoy the attention they get so much that they stay in bed long after they could get up and take care of themselves.

How long had one man been sick?

What did the Lord ask him?

Why did the man say he had never been healed?

What did the Lord tell him to do?

What happened?

What did the religious leaders say to him?

What did he answer?

The man to whom the Lord spoke had not been really trying. He expected someone else to do the work for him. So the Lord

first asked him if he really wanted to be well, and then told him to get up and make an effort himself.

Later the Lord said to him, “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.” Our faults are sicknesses in our souls, and sometimes we are just as slow to make the effort to give them up as we are to help ourselves to be well. When our parents tell us we must do differently, we say, “I can’t,” just as the man in our story did. So the Lord is speaking to us, too, in this story, and telling us that we must first make up our minds that we really want to be good and then try hard to overcome our faults. If we do this, He is always near at hand to help us.

Junior

The spiritual lesson of this miracle can be easily understood by Juniors. In connection with verse 14, be sure to review with the children the reasons why the Lord performed miracles. These were given in the Junior notes of the lesson on “The Miracle at Cana,” John 2.

Through which division of the land did the Lord have to pass in going from Judea to Galilee?

Where did the Lord stop to rest?

Who came to the well for water?

Why did the Jews despise the Samaritans?

What kind of water did the Lord tell the woman He could give her?

What is “living” water?

What did He tell her about herself?

Whom did He declare Himself to be?

Of what “food” did He speak to His disciples?

What did the Samaritans think of Him?

The Lord went on into Galilee and there performed a second miracle. Then He returned to Jerusalem for another of the religious feasts, and our story for today takes place there. For many years there was uncertainty among scholars as to which of several pools in Jerusalem was the pool of our story, but there seems to be no longer much doubt. Harper’s Bible Dictionary says it is now believed to be “the pool found during repairs in 1888 near St. Anne’s Church in the Bezetha Quarter of Jerusalem not far from the

Sheep's Gate and Tower of Antonia. It is below the slippery-stepped crypt of a ruined 4th century Church of St. Mary Probatika, and has a five-arched portico with faded frescoes of the miracle of Christ's healing (John 5:2 f.)."

Again we remember that water is the symbol of truth. Any gathering together of waters, like the sea or a lake or a pool, pictures truth gathered in our memories. The pool in Jerusalem pictures truth about the Lord and about what He tells us is the right way to live. We all have some of this truth in our memories. So we all have our pool of Bethesda. Sheep picture innocence and gentleness. The Lord's truth is stored up in our memories especially at times when we are in innocent and gentle states, because then we like to hear it.

Who were gathered around the pool of Bethesda?

What were they waiting for?

Do you remember what the word *angel* means?

What happened to the first sick person who stepped in after the water was troubled?

Did you ever, when you were about to do something wrong, have a little voice inside of you say, "Don't do it; you know it's wrong"? That voice is an angel or messenger from the Lord stirring up the truth in your memory. If you listen to that voice and obey it at once, you are like those who were quick to step into the pool and be healed. All our faults are spiritual diseases and infirmities.

How long had one man at the pool been sick?

What did the Lord ask him?

What was his answer?

Sometimes we think our faults are too strong for us. Then we don't really try to overcome them, and no one else can do it for us.

What did the Lord tell the man to do?

What happened when he tried?

We must first really want to be good, and then if we make a sincere and active effort to correct our faults, remembering that the Lord is present to help us, the Lord can give us strength to overcome them.

On what day of the week was this miracle performed?

Why were the Jews angry?

Can you repeat the commandment about the sabbath? We can see that the work we are not to do is the kind of work we have to do all the rest of the week, the kind of work which is necessary to our life in the world. We are to keep the sabbath “holy.” This means that we are to use it for worship of the Lord, for learning about Him and how He wants us to live, and for doing kind things for other people for which we do not have time during the week. Look up Luke 4:16. This teaches us that the Lord always went to the synagogue on the sabbath day. He also performed many miracles on the sabbath. And He said, “It is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.” (Matthew 12:12)

What did the Lord say to the man when He met him again in the temple?

He did not heal the man just to make his body well, but to help him to do right. If a person is bad, he can do more harm in a well body than in a sick one. We do not overcome all our faults at once, but one at a time. As soon as we get rid of one, we should be on the watch for another one to fight.

Intermediate

A study of the correspondences in the story will introduce the important subject of how we overcome our faults—both the superficial and the deeper ones. The command, “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk” should be impressed upon young people as a constant challenge.

After His two days in Samaria the Lord went on into Galilee. John records a second miracle performed there (John 4:43-54) and says that the Galileans also received Him, “having seen all the things that he did at Jerusalem at the feast: for they also went unto the feast.” This suggests that He may have performed miracles in Jerusalem also on His first visit there after the beginning of His ministry. The Galileans referred to were probably Jews, since they went to the feast at Jerusalem. Most of the Galileans were Gentiles. Galilee was called “Galilee of the Gentiles.” We

might note also that John tells of a cleansing of the temple in that first visit (John 2:13-16). The other three Gospels place the story of the cleansing of the temple at the time of the Lord's entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of the last week of His earthly life. There may have been more than one cleansing, but such differences in order in the Gospel accounts need not trouble us, for we know that the historical sequence of events is not important, but the sequence as recorded in the Word is. That is, there is always a reason in the internal sense why the events in any chapter come in the order in which they do come.

In our chapter for today the Lord has again gone down to Jerusalem for one of the great feasts. There were three of these: the Passover, the feast of the first fruits, and the feast of the ingathering or harvest, which was also called the feast of tabernacles. The pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem has been almost certainly identified by the discovery in 1888 of a pool under the crypt of a fourth-century Christian Church in Jerusalem. This pool has a five-arched portico decorated with faded frescoes of the miracle of our lesson, and it is near what was known as the sheep's gate. You notice that in your Bible (KJV) the word *market* in verse 2 is in italics, which means that it is not in the original Greek text. The text says only "near that of the sheep"; so *gate* is as reasonable an assumption as *market*. In the correspondence it is the word *sheep* which is important.

In the Word all diseases and afflictions of the physical body picture diseased conditions of the soul, and in our lesson today we have a vivid picture of the condition of the church in the Lord's time—which Jerusalem represents—where, around the pool of Bethesda lay "a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water."

The pool of Bethesda, "at Jerusalem by the sheep," pictures the knowledges of God and of the way of life stored up in our memories from the day of our innocent childhood. This pool had five porches. Throughout the Word five is the number which signifies "few." But it is also often associated in our thoughts with the

number ten which signifies “remains.” *Remains* [*reliquiae*] is the word Swedenborg uses for the states of goodness and the knowledges of truth acquired in our early childhood, which the Lord stores up deep within us to draw upon for our help in later life. The five porches which lead to this pool are on the one hand our five senses through which all knowledges enter our minds in the first place and on the other hand they picture the fact that some of the people still had a few remains through which they could be reached. Each of us, too, has this pool with the five porches.

All our faults and weaknesses are pictured by the sick people who were lying around the pool. We read that “an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water.” From time to time in our own experience an “angel” or messenger of the Lord stirs up our memory of the truth. We call this “angel” conscience. The sick person most alert and eager to get to the water was healed. In the same way, the particular fault of which we are most conscious and which we are most eager to overcome is corrected.

But we all have more serious and crippling faults which are harder to fight. We may recognize them, but they seem so much a part of us that we feel that it is of no use even to try to overcome them. This is the impotent man of our story. The Lord says to us, as He said to the man, “Wilt thou be made whole?” Do we really want to get rid of our evils? And when we excuse ourselves, He says: “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.” Put in other words: “Lift up your thoughts to the Lord, remember the religious principles in which you have been brought up, and do right instead of wrong.” With the Lord’s help we can do this.

“And on the same day was the sabbath.” The sabbath day represents the state of peace and rest which comes after a victory over temptation has been won. The Lord often healed on the sabbath day. The religious leaders had made the day one of rigid external observance and had forgotten its origin and purpose. The Lord stripped off their tradition and restored the sabbath as a day to be kept holy, a day to worship the Lord and to serve the neighbor.

We have many problems connected with Sunday keeping. In Matthew 12:12 the Lord tells us “it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days.” He Himself always went to the synagogue on the sabbath and then went about doing good. We should follow His example. Young people who differ from their parents as to what should or should not be done on Sunday might remember that they do not “do well” when they disobey their parents. Sunday should be a day for worshiping the Lord, learning of Him, and doing things which help others and which advance our spiritual progress.

Basic Correspondences

- a pool = truth gathered in the memory
 - five = a few “remains” of good states
 - a bed = the doctrine which we have accepted
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Senior

Our will to be made whole by the Lord is the question to be placed squarely before this age group. They find excuses easily, and their own individual responsibility for their spiritual development is a thought we should keep constantly in their minds.

As we have learned, the Lord often went back and forth between Judea and Galilee in the years of His ministry. This is more evident in the Gospel of John than in the other three Gospels because the story of the greater part of His three years’ ministry is compressed into the first half of the Gospel to make room for the fuller development of His teaching during the last week of His life. So in our chapter for today we find Him again going to Jerusalem for one of the feasts. We might note, too, that again our lesson is concerned with water—this time with water in the city of Jerusalem itself. This is an interesting development, for our lesson on the miracle at Cana concerned truth applied to the outward conduct, and the teaching at Jacob’s well concerned truth in the mind, and now we have a lesson which emphasizes the application of truth to the will.

The pool of Bethesda “at Jerusalem by the sheep market” with

its five porches filled with “impotent folk” waiting for the troubling of the water is a wonderful picture of the state of the church at the time of the Lord’s Advent. The pool near the sheep market—or sheep’s gate—stands for knowledge of the truth remaining from an earlier state of innocence and trust. “Five” signifies “a little but enough.” The scribes and Pharisees had left the people very little access to the genuine truth of the Word. This is illustrated in their attitude toward the sabbath. And the body of the church was full of disease—“blind, halt, withered.” Yet the people gathered around the pool at every possible approach, waiting for the occasional touch of the Lord’s spirit which might bring healing to someone.

All of us who make up the church today are also like these people. We recognize that we have faults, and we know that we must try to correct them one by one. As we see and acknowledge each one, we—spiritually speaking—go to the pool of Bethesda at Jerusalem by the sheep’s gate (the truths of the Word which we have learned in our innocent childhood), and the Lord stirs the pool for us and shows us just the truth to apply for the correction of that particular fault.

But our story is principally concerned with one man who had had his infirmity for thirty-eight years and did not believe he could ever get to the pool in time. We have deep-seated evils within us which seem so much a part of us that we are likely to say of them, “I was born that way; I can’t be expected to change my nature.” In any dark state of the world or of the individual soul the worst disease is discouragement, which paralyzes all effort to improve. This is pictured in the story by the fact that the man felt that he could not get to the pool in time because he had no one to help him. But a new day had dawned for this man with the appearance of the Lord at the pool. Swedenborg tells us that *thirty* pictures “something of combat” and also “a full state of remains.” The man was not beyond hope of reform, and he actually possessed enough knowledge to correct his condition if he had the will to correct it. The first question the Lord asked him was, “Wilt thou be made whole?” *Eight*, because the eighth day is the beginning of

a new week, pictures “every beginning.”

So now the Lord says to him, “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.” Rising always pictures the elevation of our thoughts above the natural level; a bed—on which we rest—pictures the doctrine we have accepted as the basis of our life; and to walk is to move forward. If we look to the Lord for strength, remember the Christian principles which we have been taught, and exert ourselves to go forward with them, there is no sin or weakness which the Lord will not give us strength to overcome. Recall how Joshua, after the defeat at Ai, “rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark,” and said, “Alas, O Lord”; and the Lord said to him, “Get thee up; wherefore liest thou upon thy face?” All of us need at times to remind ourselves that discouragement is from hell and that to give in to it is a sin. Many of our troubles come from the weakness of our will to overcome them.

We need also to take to heart the Lord’s later words to the same man in the temple: “Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon thee.” When we have been “made whole,” we need to examine our former state to see the evils in ourselves which brought it about so that we may avoid them in the future. The sabbath is the state of rest and peace after victory, but we do not remain in the sabbath state while we are in this world. There is always a new work week beginning, with new problems to solve and weaknesses to recognize and fight. The sabbath is the time to look to the Lord with gratitude for the past help, and also a time for self-examination and new resolutions.



Adult

By way of introduction the Adults may be interested in the presumed identification of the Pool of Bethesda given most fully in the Junior notes, and in the difference between the KJV translation and the original in verse 2. (The Revised Standard Version says “sheep gate.”) There are several obvious discussion topics in the lesson—notably the recognition of discouragement as a personal evil to be overcome. Verse 14 is also important for Adults. Read here *Divine Providence*, n. 231 on the seventh kind of profanation.

Again we have a lesson about water, but this time it is about water gathered into a pool, truth gathered in the memory, our knowledge of the Word. This pool of Bethesda is in Jerusalem near the sheep market, or sheep's gate. Spiritually, it is in the holy city of our minds and associated with our affections for innocence. Is not this true of our knowledge of the Word, stored up throughout our childhood when our minds are in innocent and open states? The same is suggested by the five "porches," five being the number which signifies both "a little" and "remains." Divine providence provides that every mind shall have such a "pool," such a body of truth from the Word, even though such knowledge may not have come by direct contact with the Word itself.

In these porches—at every point of access to the pool—lay a great multitude of impotent folk. How clearly this pictures the spiritual state of each one of us: a multitude of diseased affections and thoughts, blind, lame, and helpless, gathered around the little pool of truth which the Lord has stored up deep within us for their healing. For, we are told, "an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water." Most of the time the pool of divine truth lies quiet in our minds, but now and then, when our state and circumstances make it profitable for us, an angel, a messenger of the Lord, the Lord's spirit working in us for our regeneration, comes down and stirs the pool, quickening our consciousness of the truth. Swedenborg tells us that the troubling of the waters represents "vivification through acknowledgment and faith, thus also purification through truths" (AC 10083⁴).

Then some one fault in us may be healed. The invalid who was most alert, who was watching most keenly for the moving of the waters, was the fortunate one; that is, the fault of which we are most keenly conscious and which we are most anxious to correct is the one which will be touched and healed by our quickened understanding of the truth. We cannot fight all our faults at once. The writings tell us that genuine repentance must go further than a general confession that we are sinners: it must single out one particular sin after another and fight it (TCR 525). Our regeneration

advances step by step. For “precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little” (Isaiah 28:10).

But there was one man at the pool who had been helpless for thirty-eight years and who had never been able to get to the water in time. He pictures some deeper evil in us which we feel helpless to fight. Each one of us has some such deep evil which we attack only halfheartedly, feeling that it is so much a part of us that we can never get rid of it. “I can’t help it; I was born that way,” we say. The thirty-eighth year suggests that we have enough remains of good and truth to overcome this evil if we will—represented by *thirty*—and that it is time for a new state to begin in us—represented by *eight*. It is at this point that the Lord Himself comes to us and says, “Wilt thou be made whole?” Do we really wish to get rid of our deeper evils? Do we wish to make a thorough job of our regeneration? Or are we content to attack the more obvious, superficial faults and to let our really serious shortcomings remain, excusing ourselves by pleading helplessness?

The Lord answered the man’s excuses with a challenge: “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.” Does not this remind us of the Lord’s words to Joshua, after his defeat at Ai: “Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?” From the writings we learn that “to rise” signifies elevation, as from evil to good or from ignorance to intelligence (AC 2401; 4481). We must lift up our hearts and minds out of the obscurity of worldly fears and doubts, and trust in the Lord’s promises and power. Then we must raise what we know of the truth—the bed on which we lie—and take it with us actively in our effort to overcome our evils, just as David, confident that the Lord was on his side, used one smooth stone from the brook to slay Goliath. The Lord said to the disciples, when they asked why they could not cast out a certain devil: “Because of your unbelief; for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.” The mountain in this passage pictures our

satisfaction with ourselves as we are, with our own qualities and our own ideas. We are often even secretly pleased with our deeper faults because we think of them as part of ourselves, as making us different from other people. This self-satisfaction is a great mountain in the way of our spiritual progress. So we must first be sure that we sincerely want to be made “whole,” and then, looking confidently to the Lord for help, go forward actively with all the truth we have.

In this miracle we have one of the numerous instances in which the religious leaders found fault with the Lord for His use of the sabbath. They had added to the commandment in regard to the sabbath many traditions, which they had come to consider binding. The Lord disregarded these traditions and went about teaching and healing on the sabbath. In one argument with the scribes and Pharisees on the subject the Lord told them, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.” (Mark 2:27-28) The sabbath was indeed made for man. Men who do not observe the sabbath inevitably sink into a state of absorption in self and the world, which is the death promised to the sabbath-breaker, the death of all spiritual life. While we are in this world, the greater part of our time must necessarily be spent in taking care of ourselves and our families. We need one day in seven when we lay aside our concern with worldly affairs and think about the Lord and His kingdom. This is the purpose of the sabbath. The Lord performed so many miracles on the sabbath as a picture of the fact that the sabbath is a day peculiarly set aside for the healing of our souls.

The practical question of what we should or should not do on Sunday is a perennial one, everywhere complicated by custom and tradition. Every nation, every community, every family has its own ideas on the subject. When we adhere to these traditional ideas to the hindering of the Lord’s work in our souls or in the souls of others we are doing as the people in Gospel days did. On the other hand, we must not use the Lord’s statements about the sabbath as an excuse for doing anything we happen to want to do

on Sunday. Nothing in the Lord's example gives us warrant for laziness, for selfish indulgence, for neglect of worship. "As his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day" (Luke 4:16). The sabbath should be a day of rest from worldly thoughts and activities, and a day of active approach to the Lord. We should welcome it as an opportunity to think and to learn of Him, to take stock of our souls, to cultivate our affections for the neighbor, and to strengthen our good resolutions in preparing for the coming week. It is the day of all days to "take up our bed and walk" spiritually.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 10360⁸: "When the Lord was in the world, and united His Human to the Divine Itself, He abrogated the sabbath in respect to representative worship, or in respect to its worship such as was with the Israelitish people; and made the sabbath day a day of instruction in the doctrine of faith and of love. This is involved in what is written in John . . . by the 'healing of the sick' is signified the purifying of man from evils and the falsities of evil; by a 'bed' is signified doctrine; and by 'walking' is signified life."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Where was Samaria? *middle of land*
J. Who were the Samaritans? *foreigners*
P. Where did the Lord stop to rest on His way from Jerusalem to Galilee?
Jacob's well
J. Why was the Samaritan woman surprised when He asked her to give Him a drink? *Jews didn't talk to Samaritans*
J. What did He tell her about water? *you should have asked . . .*
J. What did He tell her about Himself? *I am Christ*
J. What did He tell His disciples about His "food"? *to do God's will*
P. How did the Samaritans receive Him? *many believed*
J. Where was the pool of Bethesda? *Jerusalem*
P. How many porches did it have? *five*
P. Who waited in the porches? *sick people*
P. What were they waiting for? *"troubling" of water*
P. What happened whenever the water was troubled? *first to step in was healed*

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- J. How long had one man at the pool been sick? *thirty-eight years*
- J. What did the Lord first ask him? *do you want to be healed?*
- P. What did he answer? *no one to help me*
- P. What did the Lord tell him to do? *rise, take bed, walk*
- P. What happened when he tried? *he was healed*
- J. What did the religious leaders tell him? *he was breaking the sabbath*
- J. When the Lord met him again, what did He say to him? *sin no more*
- J. What did the leaders try to do when they learned who had healed the man?
kill Jesus
- I. What is the pool of Bethesda in us? *knowledge of God's way, stored in memory*
- S. What is meant by the words, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk"? *elevate your thoughts, take the doctrine on which you base your life, and move forward*