

# Jesus Returns to Jerusalem for Passover



Christ Healing the Paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda by Bartolome-Esteban Murillo (1617-1682)

## Jesus Heals on the Sabbath

<sup>1</sup> After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep [Gate] a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. <sup>3</sup> In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. <sup>4</sup> For [from time to time] an angel of the Lord used to come down into the pool; and the water was stirred up, so the first one to get in [after the stirring of the water] was healed of whatever disease afflicted him. <sup>5</sup> One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" <sup>7</sup> The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." <sup>8</sup> Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." <sup>9</sup> Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked.

Now that day was a Sabbath. <sup>10</sup> So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." <sup>11</sup> He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" <sup>12</sup> They asked him, "Who is the man who told you, 'Take it up and walk'?" <sup>13</sup> The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. <sup>14</sup> After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." <sup>15</sup> The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. <sup>16</sup> Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> But Jesus answered them, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." <sup>18</sup> For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God. (John 5:1-18)

## **The Authority of the Son**

<sup>19</sup>Jesus answered and said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also. <sup>20</sup>For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed. <sup>21</sup>For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. <sup>22</sup>Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son, <sup>23</sup>so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. <sup>24</sup>Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life. <sup>25</sup>Amen, amen, I say to you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. <sup>26</sup>For just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to his Son the possession of life in himself. <sup>27</sup>And he gave him power to exercise judgment, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup>Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice <sup>29</sup>and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation. <sup>30</sup>“I cannot do anything on my own; I judge as I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me. (John 5:19-30)

## **Witnesses to Jesus**

<sup>31</sup>“If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony cannot be verified. <sup>32</sup>But there is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true. <sup>33</sup>You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth. <sup>34</sup>I do not accept testimony from a human being, but I say this so that you may be saved. <sup>35</sup>He was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light. <sup>36</sup>But I have testimony greater than John’s. The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. <sup>37</sup>Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf. But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form, <sup>38</sup>and you do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent. <sup>39</sup>You search the scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf. <sup>40</sup>But you do not want to come to me to have life. (John 5:31-40)

## **Unbelief of Jesus’ Hearers**

<sup>41</sup>“I do not accept human praise; <sup>42</sup>moreover, I know that you do not have the love of God in you. <sup>43</sup>I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. <sup>44</sup>How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? <sup>45</sup>Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father: the one who will accuse you is Moses, in whom you have placed your hope. <sup>46</sup>For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. <sup>47</sup>But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?” (John 5:41-47)

## **The Pools of Bethesda**

For centuries there was debate among bible scholars as to whether or not the Apostle John was the actually author of the Gospel attributed to him. The fact that there were no physical remains of the Pools of Bethesda was cited by proponents as evidence that the Gospel of John must have been written by someone who lived sometime after John and who had no first hand experience with the region in which this particular story took place. Then, surprise-surprise, archeologists discovered the pools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century further vindicating what Saint Paul observed in his epistle to the Romans:

<sup>4</sup>“...Let God be true though every man be false, as it is written, “That thou mayest be justified in thy words, and prevail when thou art judged.” (Rom 3:4)

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Conrad Schick, excavated a large structure near the Church of Saint Anne, which he believed was the Pool of Bethesda. Further archeological investigations at this site in the 1960’s uncovered the remains of a series of pools including both large and smaller “healing” pools, and the remains of the Asclepieion, a Byzantine basilica, and a Crusader chapel. From this archeological evidence the following history of the Pools of Bethesda can be assembled. It is believed that the first of the two main pools was built in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC as a reservoir for the city of Jerusalem. Later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC a channel was built to deliver water to a second pool. This pools likely provided both potable water for Jerusalem as well as ritual cleaning (*mikveh*) necessary for the Jewish religious practices during the Second Temple period.



The Pools of Bethesda, as described in the Gospel of John as having five porticos, were likely constructed sometime during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC by the occupying Roman government. This complex was known as the *Asclepeion*, a temple dedicated to, *Asclepius*, the Green and Roman god of medicine. The picture on the following page shows a model of this complex, as it is believed it may have looked in Jesus' time. It is believed that the *Asclepeion* was located outside the city wall of Jerusalem when it had been constructed, however during the 1<sup>st</sup> AD when Herod Agrippa expanded the walls it was brought inside the city of Jerusalem. It is not know how much of this temple remained intact, but the archeological evidence suggests that during the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD the Byzantines, under the direction of the Empress Eudocia, used some of the remaining *Asclepeion* upon which a large basilica was constructed over the Pools of Bethesda. In 614 AD, the church was destroyed by the invading Persians. When the Crusaders conquered Jerusalem construction of a much smaller chapel, the Church of the Paralytic, was built on the ruins of the Byzantine basilica. A much larger church was built nearby, the Church of Saint Anne, which the Crusaders believed to be the site were Mary, the mother of Jesus, was born.



The Asclepeion and the Pools of Bethesda as they are believed to have looked in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.



## Reflections

### Kevin's Reflections:

#### The House of Grace or the House of Disgrace

The name of the site where Jesus healed the paralytic, the Pools of Bethesda, can offer us insight into what happened that day and the response by some of the Jews to Jesus healing on the Sabbath. The word "Bethesda" is derived from the Hebrew/Aramic words *Beth hesda* which translates into the "house of grace." Interestingly, the word *hesda* can also translate into "disgrace." What's going on here with the word play? It can be easily understood why the site might be considered a "house of grace" given the healing that occurred there, but why disgrace? It is likely this association was due to the presence of so many sick and infirm people who congregated at the site in the hope of being healed. Why would being sick and infirm be considered a disgrace? The Jews believed that sickness and infirmity was due to the sin of the individual or perhaps their parents. Remember the story of the man born blind:

*As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth.<sup>2</sup> And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. (John 9:1-3)*

Consequently, it was thought that sickness and calamity was God's just judgment on those who had sinned, and so they were looked upon as those "disgraced," that is, separated from the grace of God. Jesus makes it clear that this is not the case. This attitude towards sin and sickness helps to explain the harsh response that the Jews have towards the paralytic,

*"It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat."<sup>11</sup> He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'"*

You might think that they would rejoice that a man who had been infirm for so many years was now healed, but instead they were outraged because he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath. This way of thinking and their views of morality were constructed on the Torah and the Talmud and faithful Jews took this very seriously, both personally and as a community. This meant that one must follow the letter of the Law, and between the Torah and the Talmud there were a lot of laws, 613 according to most Jewish scholars. Why was this so important? It was important because they had promised God, when they had covenanted with Him at Sinai, that they would follow all that the Lord had told Moses for them to do:

*<sup>3</sup> Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do." (Exo 24:3)*

And this meant *all the ordinances*, all 613 of them (which developed over a period of centuries). Righteousness, therefore, was based on the individual's ability to keep the Law. The wellbeing of the individual and the community (both spiritual and material) depended upon it. Not following the law was a sin against God and the community, and as such it could be considered an act of treason. This is why the Jews were so upset about the paralytic carrying his mat, and it explains why they wanted to know the name of the subversive who told him that it was okay to do so. So what exactly was the sin that the paralytic committed? By carrying his mat on the Sabbath he had sinned against the prohibition to do any *work* on the Sabbath. This was based on the scripture from Genesis:

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.<sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done.<sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation. (Gen 2:1-3)*

It was expected that all of Israel would observe the Sabbath as God had done. This was so important that it was ranked number one of the Ten Commandments:

*<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.<sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work;<sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates;<sup>11</sup> for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it. (Gen 20:8-11)*

What was Jesus' response when the Jews confronted Jesus about the work being done?

*"My Father is at work until now, so I am at work."* (John 5:18)

Jesus goes on and explains His relationship between Him and His Father in terms that they would have been familiar with.

<sup>19</sup>*I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also.* <sup>20</sup>*For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed.* (John 5:19; emphasis added)

Jesus was comparing His relationship with the Father with that of a son with his earthly father. Remember in our discussion of Saint Joseph it was explained that the son would learn his father's trade; the son would serve as an apprentice to his father until such time as he had learned everything and then the father would, when the time was right, turn over the business to his son. Jesus had served as an apprentice to his father, Joseph, learning the trade of a *tekton*, a craftsman of stone and wood. Now, Jesus was doing His heavenly Father's work even if that meant doing it on the Sabbath.

All of this infuriated the Jews. Why? Their relationship with God was based upon the *works* of the Law which they scrupulously observed, and expected likewise of their fellow Jews. Jesus' relationship with God was personal, that of a Son to a Father. Jesus' works was not subservience to the Law, but obedience to His Father whom He loved. He knew what His Father wanted Him to do because His Father "showed" Him; and He "saw" what His Father was doing because He *faced* Him. Jesus' relationship with His Father was *face to face*, Person to Person.

The Jews who had rebuked Jesus for healing on the Sabbath lived in Bethesda, the *House of Disgrace*. Why disgrace? They lived in disgrace because they thought that they could be justified by the Law, but they could not because once you choose the path of the Law as your salvation you must fulfill *all* of the Law. As Paul says in Galatians,

<sup>10</sup>*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them."* (Gal 3:10, emphasis added)

No one can fulfill the entirety of the Law, so it serves only to condemn us. So what was the purpose of the Law if it only condemns us? Paul explains this,

<sup>24</sup>*So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith.* <sup>25</sup>*But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian;* <sup>26</sup>*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.* (Gal 3:24-26)

The relationship that Jesus has with His Father He was extending to the Jews and to us:

<sup>24</sup>*Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life.* (Gal 3:24)

This is a relationship of belief and faith, "mind in the heart;" of standing before Christ *face to face*:

<sup>1</sup>*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us* <sup>2</sup>*while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.* (Heb 12:1-2)

This is Bethesda, the *House of Grace*.

Where do I want to live—the *House of Disgrace* or the *House of Grace*? This would seem like an easy question to answer, but it's not; there is a steep price to pay for living in the *House of Grace*.

## “But You Do Not Want to Come to Me to Have Life”

To enter into the *House of Grace* and to dwell within it comes with a steep price. One could rightfully ask, “I thought Christ paid that price through His suffering and death on the cross? He did, and the *grace* won for us by His sacrifice empowers us to do what He has done:

*“I cannot do anything on my own; I judge what I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.”* (John 5:30, emphasis added)

This is the steep price that every follower of Jesus must pay to live in the House of Grace: we too must say of ourselves, *“I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.”* The will and its freedom are essential elements of the divine image in man. It is common in our modern culture to mistakenly believe that it is the *most* fundamental element of human nature, and that we are not fully human until the potential of this *will* is actuated in acts of autonomous self-determination. There is, however, something more fundamental to our nature than will, and that is *want* or desire. It is *want* that gives directionality to the *will* which then marshals all the elements of our being, body, soul (mind), and spirit (heart) towards the acquisition of the *wanted*.

We could get into a long discussion of *wants*, and even compare these to *needs*; we could examine Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, perhaps examine surveys of *wants* and needs of various peoples and culture over time, but we are not going to do this as interesting as it might be. Why? Because the Bible has already told us what humanity really wants—well, to be more exact, the Serpent did when he tempted us with what *he* knew we really *wanted*:

*Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden’?”<sup>2</sup> And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden;<sup>3</sup> but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’”<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die.<sup>5</sup> For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God**, knowing good and evil.”* (Gen 3:1-5)

We want to “be like God.” What is it like to be like God? According to the Serpent, being like God means knowing good and evil. Is that really what God is like knowing good and evil or is this just another lie of the Serpent? Let’s examine that. Before creation there was God and nothing else. God is good, in fact, the very definition of good. God knows *the good* because He knows Himself. So it is true that God knows good.

On the sixth day God proclaimed that all of creation was good.

<sup>31</sup> *And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.* (Gen 1:31)

In that God knows creation it is true, God knows the good.

Before the serpent introduced evil into the Garden, and even before Lucifer (the serpent) rebelled in heaven, God in His foreknowledge knew his rebellion. In that God foreknew Lucifer’s rebellion it is true, God knows evil. But God knows good in a fundamentally different way than He knows evil because in knowing good He knows Himself, while in knowing evil, it is something apart from Himself. Knowing evil is to know something that is apart from God and therefore cannot make us like God. The Serpent’s claim also carried with it the subtle implication that it is the *will* in choosing between good and evil that defines the very essence of what it is to be God, but God does not choose between good and evil for He *is* the Good and He cannot be other than Himself.

The Serpent lied! Knowing good and evil does not make us like God, nor does choosing between good and evil make us like God.

The effects of Adam and Eve believing and acting upon this lie were devastating, yet we have never lost our *wanting* to be *like God*. In our *fallen* state we continue to strive to be like God by endeavoring to choose the good and reject what is evil and for this God gave us the Law as “as a custodian until Christ came.” Yet still we believe the lie that choosing between good and evil will make us like God, but it will not, even if we could keep the entirety of the Law. Why do we do this? We do this because we *want* a path by which we can say, “This is my life, my choice; my autonomy to succeed and to fail as I deem fit.” Frank Sinatra said, or sang it best, “I did it my way.” And when I “do it my way” I get the praise, and to be honest with you, I *want* praise. But Jesus said,

*How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? (John 5:44)*

So we keep doing the same thing, and our churches keep doing the same thing. Why?—“because we do not *want* to come to Jesus to have life.” And what is the *life* that Jesus is offering us that we would rather reject for a life of self-righteousness in following the Law? It is His life, the Trinitarian life; it is to be *like God*, which was God’s plan from the beginning.

What was going on in the Garden of Eden prior to the appearance of the Serpent and sin? We know that God brought all of animals to Adam and He allowed the man to name the animals (Gen 2:18-20). This was the *work* that God gave Adam, God *showed* the man what he was to do, and Adam *saw* and *heard* the Lord God. Who does this remind you of? Jesus. Adam was God’s apprentice. God was going to show Adam how to take care of Creation, and Eve was to be a part of this apprenticeship. But God’s plans were greater than this because this apprenticeship was not just about stewardship of Creation, it was actually about God sharing His life with humanity so that we could be *like God*.

So what is God really like? Well again the Scriptures tell us:

<sup>7</sup> *Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.* (John 4:7-8)

The love that *is* God is not some warm fuzzy feeling you get while watching a Hallmark movie (which by the way I confess an addiction to). The God of Love is an ontological reality; love is not a feeling it is a Person, and not a Person, but three Persons: the Trinity, perfect unity in plurality. Such love and unity is unknown to us in our *fallen* state. Yet, this is our destiny as the Bride of the Lamb. This is what we truly *want*. We cannot get there by way of the *House of Disgrace*, of choosing between good and evil, and by following the Law. Jesus has been preparing a house for His Bride, the *House of Grace*, but we must *want to come to Him*, and lay aside our *will* to do His *will*, and our autonomy for His life.

I *want* to want You more, Jesus. I want to *see* and *hear* what You are trying to *show* and *tell* me. I *want* your life of abundance, the Trinitarian *Life* of love that You intended to share with Your Bride since the dawn of Creation. Let me care not about the praise of men, but rather only that You find me pleasing. Help me to surrender my *will* to Your *will* so I can say, “I only do what I *see* and *hear* Jesus doing and saying.” Lord, invite me to live in your *House of Grace* that I may be a faithful apprentice to you, and that all might see the good works that You have enabled me to do so that others may see them and not praise me, but give glory to Your Father (Matt 5:16).

### **Jan’s Reflection:**

Jesus could have healed any number of sick people at the pools of Bethesda, but He chose the lame man. Can you imagine how this paralyzed man might have looked and felt after lying there for 38 long years? What was the state of his soul and spirit? Jesus knew and He said to the man, “Do you want to get well?” Now there is a pointed question for us all. Jesus does not coddle the man or take him into the pool. Jesus gives him a command, “Rise, take up your mat and walk, and the man obeys. He is instantly healed and is up and walking. This must have been something to witness; especially since it was the Sabbath.

Later Jesus finds the man in the Temple and He speaks to him for the second time. He tells the man to sin no more lest something worse befall him. Clearly the man was in need of more than a physical healing. At this point the man recognizes it was Jesus. The man’s healing is both physical and spiritual. He is no longer paralyzed or trapped. Did Jesus heal this man on this day to make a larger statement? When Jesus encounters the Jews after He heals the paralytic they are very angry and blinded because of their strict adherence to the Law; they were unable to see the new thing Jesus was doing. I can apply this to my own life for examination. Might I be suffering from spiritual paralysis that keeps me from laying hold of God’s grace? When the man was called to rise and take up his mat he is called to a purposeful life in God. This was not a passive command; but a call to action and fruitfulness.

Interesting to me is the fact that many Bible scholars believe that the number “5” stands for grace. There are 5 porticoes at the pools of Bethesda. I don’t believe this is a coincidence. We, too, are called to rise, take up our responsibilities to one another in love and walk with Him.