

## Bethesda

John 5

J. G. Bellett.

Article 40 of 47 **Short Meditations**

(Cavenagh, 1866.)

The Lord is seen occasionally at Jerusalem, in John; but not so in the other Gospels. But unlike what He is in Galilee, where thousands followed Him, in Jerusalem He is a solitary man — as we may observe in John 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10.

At His last entrance into the city, I mean by the road from Jericho, through Bethany and the Mount of Olives, which is recorded by all the Evangelists, I know He is followed by a multitude — but that is no exception to what we have observed, that He was a solitary man in Jerusalem; though in the midst of thousands, when in the parts of Galilee and around all the shores of the lake of Tiberias.

In John, too, the Feasts are treated as though they were bygone elements. They are spoken of much in the way that St. Paul in his Epistles would speak of Mount Sinai or the legal ordinances. They are called, in this Gospel, "the feasts of the Jews" — 2, 5, 6, 7 — save indeed in John 13: 1, where the Passover of that day is honoured by our Evangelist, as a divinely-instituted Feast, because the Lord was then about to fulfil it, as the true Paschal-Lamb.

These are peculiarities in John, and very characteristic of this — that in John, the Lord is at the end of His question with the Jew, and is standing as among sinners, disowned by the world that was made by Him, and rejected by His people to whom He had offered Himself. See John 1: 10, 11.

It is in perfect and consistent wisdom that the Spirit of God has not told us what Feast this was which had now drawn the Lord to Jerusalem. It mattered not which of them it was; for He was about to show Himself in the city of the Jews, the city of the Feasts and solemnities of that people, as One that would supersede them all, and all that belonged to them. So that, we have not only *a Feast* there on this occasion, but we have *the Sabbath-day*, and *the religious rulers* of the people, *the Temple*, and this singular and wonderful *ordinance* of Bethesda, all before us in this scene.

This Pool by the sheep-market at Jerusalem, or Bethesda, was a certain provision made in the grace of God in the behalf of His people at Jerusalem. The system established in Israel did not provide it. *It was extraordinary and occasional* — as the raising up of a Judge or a Prophet had been in earlier days, or the mission of an Angel, now and again, as to a Gideon or a Manoah. So, the stirring of this pool. But withal, it was a testimony to the fact, that there were resources of mercy and of power in the God of Israel for His people, beyond all that was then ordinarily dispensed to them. Its very name intimated this; Bethesda, "house of mercy." And as being this, it was a pledge to Israel of Messiah. It told of Him beforehand, as ordinances and prophets had done.

But — Jesus beside the Pool of Bethesda, as we see in this chapter, is a sight that, in the spirit of Moses at the Bush, we may well turn aside to see. If He had, of old, been reflected in that water, He stands there now to dry it up. Nay more. He stands in contrast with it.

This sight reminds me of the Epistle to the Hebrews. There, the Apostle sets the Lord Jesus beside the ordinances of the Law, as here the Lord sets Himself beside the Pool close by the sheep-market, which was as one of them. And the same thing takes place here in John 5 as in that Epistle.

There was a witness to Christ in each of these. Bethesda bore witness to Him; the ordinances of the Law did the same. But, let Jesus stand beside the Pool, or be brought beside the ordinances of the Law, we shall find contrast to be as strong as similitude. We have but to listen to the Lord here, and to the Spirit in the Apostle there, in order to learn this clearly and fully.

"Wilt thou be made whole?" was the only word which the Lord took with Him when He addressed the poor cripple at that place. Was he ready to put himself, just as he was, into His hand? Was he willing to be His debtor? Could he trust himself, with his need and infirmity, alone with Jesus? This was all. And surely this, in its simplicity, is in complete and full contrast with the cumbrous, weighty machinery of Bethesda. No rivalry, no delay, no uncertainty, no help sought and rendered, are here as they are there. Here with Christ it is, "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life." It is, "Why tarriest thou? Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins." But neither of these voices, nor any thing like them, is heard from the troubled bosom of that strange, mysterious water. The Angel that stirred it at certain seasons had never awakened such sounds as these.

"Wilt thou be made whole?" Simple, and weighty, and full of consolation!

The Lord was then in Jerusalem. He was in the great centre and representative of human religiousness, surrounded at that moment by its rich and various provisions. It was the Sabbath. It was a feast-time. The city of solemnities was in one of its palmy hours. The Temple was at hand, the Pharisees were around, and a great multitude of expectants and votaries gathered about the Pool by the sheep-market, the ordinance or angelic ministry of Bethesda. In the midst of all this He stands. But it is as a new thing, another thing. He takes no notice of the feast-day, nor of the Sabbath, nor of the Temple. His words sound as though they pronounced the doom of all these. "Wilt thou be made whole?" was their funeral knell. The poor cripple whom they addressed way at once free himself whether of rivals or of friends. Those who might have struggled with him, or those who might have aided him, he may now equally overlook. And he need not wait. Delay and hope may be exchanged for present enjoyment. He need neither doubt nor tarry. Ordinances and angels and helpers and rivals' delay and uncertainty, all were thus blessedly and gloriously disposed of by Jesus in his behalf. When Jesus appeared, when the Son of God stood beside this Pool, the only question was, would the poor cripple leave all for Him, and in that way stand by and see the salvation of God.

What a word was this, in the midst of such a scene, and at such a moment! "Wilt thou be made whole?"

The poverty of the Pool is exposed. It is seen to be but as a "beggarly element." It has no glory by reason of the glory that excelleth. And after this same manner, the Spirit exposes "the worldly sanctuary," and all its provisions and services, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. There the Apostle, under the Holy Ghost, sets Jesus again beside Bethesda, beside the system of ordinances that had gone before, and exposes them all in their poverty and impotency. There had been a reflection of Christ in these ceremonies of the Temple, as there had been in this water by the sheep-market; but the reflection had no substance — it was a shadow — and it was gone when the true light filled the place. Jesus alone is glorified. When the Spirit brings Him in, in that Epistle, He keeps Him in, saying of Him., "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever." And here, the Lord Himself speaks to the poor cripple of nothing but of His own healing power — "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk." He was to carry that which once, while he was hanging over the Pool, bore him. He needed nothing else. He knew the healing of the Son of God, and he was free.

Thus it might have been with him. He represents this to us. But, perhaps, he was but an unconscious type of the way of the Son of God with sinners. For, personally, he does not seem to enter

into the scene. Instead of being abstracted and fixed by the Lord, instead of looking up in the Stranger's face with wonder and delight at the words addressed to him, and at once transferring himself, just as he was, in all his sorrow and need, into His hand, he talks of his present condition. Natural this is, I know; done every day; the common way of man. We need not wonder at it, nor that this man was afterwards found in the Temple, instead of being, like the Samaritan leper of Luke 17, at the feet of his Deliverer. These are but the ways and workings of the legal, religious mind, whether in Judea or in Christendom; for it has no ear for the proposals of grace. And again I say, we need not wonder at this one man, this cripple that was healed, when we see at that moment "a great multitude of impotent folk" lingering round that uncertain, disappointing Pool, though the Son of God was abroad in the land, carrying with Him and in Him salvation without money and without price, without doubt or delay, for all who would come to Him; and that, too, in defiance of all hindrance or rivalry, and independent of all help or countenance.

All this reads us a lesson. Indeed it does. The Pool thickly frequented, Jesus passing by unheeded! The Pool sought unto, while Jesus has to seek, and propose Himself! What a picture of the religion of the heart of man! Ordinances, with all their cumbrous machinery, waited on; the grace of God that brings salvation slighted! or at least, this grace has to propose itself, to be preached and pressed, like Jesus at Bethesda, while these ordinances, like that Pool, are crowded by willing votaries every day.

But further. This Pool has its neighbourhood, as well as itself, for our inspection — the scene has its accompaniments or its accidents for our further instruction.

We read here, "And on the same day was the Sabbath. "

In the other Gospels, when the Lord is challenged for doing His work on such a day, He answers either from the case of David eating the show-bread; or from the Priests doing work in the Temple; or from a word of the Prophets, "I will have mercy, and not sacrifice;" or from the fact that they themselves, His accusers, would lead out their ass or their ox, on the Sabbath, to watering. But here, on this occasion, in John's Gospel, being challenged on this same ground of healing on such a day, He says, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work."

Wondrous sentence! But let me first notice, how characteristic of John it is. The Lord does not here, as in the other Gospels, on like occasions, as we have just seen, put himself in company with David, or with the Priests, or with the words of the Prophets, or with the ways, the common accredited ways of men, but with God. It is not what David had once done, nor what the Priests would do, nor what men, even His accusers themselves, were doing every day, but what the Father had ever been doing in this needy, ruined world, that the Lord pleads as the standard of His actings. And on the distinguished occasion then before Him, restoring the cripple at the Pool of Bethesda, He had given a sample of this.

This is full of character. But surely, it is full of wonder too. "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work."

Man at the beginning forfeited the Sabbath. By sinning he broke the rest of creation. He lost the garden, and became a drudge in the earth, that he might get bread by sweat of face, and live. But when man thus lost his rest, the Lord God left His, and at once began to work again.

He had hallowed the seventh day, in memory of His having finished His creation-work. He rested then. And having rested, He enjoyed His rest, walking with the creature whom His hand had made in His own image, after His likeness, in the garden which He had formed and furnished for him. But when

sin entered, and the Creation-Rest was gone, the Lord God not only began at once to work, but to work for His self-ruined creature — as we read, "The Lord God made coats of skins, and clothed them," clothed the man and the woman, who had now reduced themselves to the condition of guilty, exposed sinners.

Wondrous display of God! The glorious Framer of the heavens and the earth, the One whose fingers had just garnished the sky above us, and whose creatures were filling, and furnishing the ground we tread on, now turns His hand (to His praise be it remembered for ever) to make a covering for a sinner. God in grace, the Father of our Lord Jesus, thus began to work. And so, onward through Old Testament days, He was active in love, showing mercy. He was not enjoying His Rest as Creator of a finished work, but working, in grace, in the midst of ruins, on new-creation principles, as Patriarchs and Prophets and Israel, and the ordinances of the Law, and this very Pool of Bethesda had, in their several ways and seasons, been witnessing. And now, on this model, Christ had come forth to work — as the healed cripple of this chapter witnesses. So that, standing at the margin of this mystic water, and with the healed man before Him, He could say, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work."

Wondrous! The Rest was left, and work was recommenced. The Pillar of the wilderness was "a like figure" of this. After leaving Egypt, Israel forfeited the Rest of Canaan which had been promised them, and out to which they had gone, and on to which they were journeying. And they had to wander outside of that Rest, for forty years. But the Cloudy Pillar, or rather the Glory that dwelt in it, would be a wanderer also. If Israel, like Adam, had forfeited their rest, the Lord God of Israel would fain be without His. And thus the Cloud went about with the Camp, rehearsing again the Divine grace of the Lord God at the beginning. The God of Israel was as the God of creation had been — for He "is the same yesterday, today, and for ever."

The Gospel is a great system of working as by Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. And on the authority of what has been done, on the title of what God Himself has wrought in the accomplished redemption of sinners, Jesus, in the Gospel, still turns to guilty, helpless man, and says to each and to all, "Wilt thou be made whole?"

Surely the sequel is well weighed. Bethesda reflects the Son of God, the Saviour. The house of mercy, and the Lord and Dispenser of mercy, are in company.

But while it reflects Him in its measure, it sets Him off in somewhat larger measure. It causes the glory and the riches of His grace to shine forth the brighter because of its own faint and dark ground — and as in the Mosaic ordinances, so in this Pool at the sheep-market, we have Him as much by contrast as by similitude.

Let me add, as a reflection upon this Pool near the sheep-market, that the relief which grace provided, in the age of the Law, was only *occasional*; as I have already noticed; as by a Judge or a Prophet — and as also the Angel stirring this water now and again, witnesses. But now, in this age of the Gospel, grace or the salvation of God is *the standing thing*, the thing ministered. "This is the day of salvation." And yet, I doubt not, there are special or occasional seasons of the Spirit's peculiar working and visitation. There are "times of visitation" now, as there had been of old; though it be fully true, that the present is a dispensation of grace, as the former had not been. The city of Corinth had such a time vouchsafed to it, as Jerusalem had before it. (Luke 19: 44; Acts 18: 10) Individuals, likewise, have such times, (1 Peter 2: 12) — and indeed if Bethesda witnessed this at Jerusalem in other days, times of Revival, as we call them, have witnessed the same in course of the age of Christendom.