



FATHER ANTON'S WORDS OF WISDOM: *Here is a beautiful explanation of this Sunday's Gospel from the Coptic Diocese of the Southern United States...* Why did Christ heal the paralytic man at the pool of Bethesda? Why did St. John choose to include this particular "sign" in His Gospel out of the innumerable other miracles Christ performed? Is there a deeper significance to the episode recorded in John 5 beyond the mere display of supernatural power? We are not used to asking questions like this. We sometimes read the Holy Bible with the feeling that our Lord walked about from city to city without any clear intention or plan, and whenever He came upon a poor sufferer who begged for help, Christ simply performed a spontaneous miracle out of His benevolence. It is true that much of our Lord's ministry was spontaneous and unplanned. Multitudes hurried out to Him at the news of His approach, and He healed them all without introduction or explanation.

The healing of the paralyzed man at Bethesda is a different case. It was a major turning-point in His ministry, because it was the first great conflict between Christ and His enemies. Before this healing, He moved about Judea and Galilee in relative peace, healing and teaching the people. The Scribes and Pharisees till then had only heard of the young prophet from Galilee, and might have casually questioned Him, but they had not yet taken a clear stance against Him. But following this miracle, the Jewish leaders suddenly perceived Him as a threat to their power and immediately resolved upon His death. From this point on, our Lord's life was continually at risk; the religious powers at Jerusalem tried to keep Him under constant surveillance, and they were in search for an opportunity to trap Him in His words.

As Christ walked one day through the porches surrounding the pool of Bethesda—meaning "house of mercy"—He gazed in agonizing pity upon the mass of human misery that met His eyes. A groaning multitude of lame, hopeless, and impoverished beings sat on the pool's edges waiting for the stirring of the water. These were what may be called the "dregs" of society—the unusable cast-aways of humanity, which resemble the undesirable shreds that remain after a wine glass is emptied, or the little particles of coffee that are discarded once the beverage is consumed. He who in the beginning created the world and mankind, and called them "good," now appeared in human form to gaze upon His creation that had been degraded and corrupted by sin. It was a painful sight to the eyes of Love. And the pain was increased by the presence of the Temple nearby, in which resided the haughty Jewish aristocrats who only shuddered at the thought of risking religious contamination by an accidental touch with one of these pitiable creatures.

But One who was the Source of Life could not meet with such a spectacle of suffering without offering hope and healing. Our Lord spotted one lame man from of the crowd who appeared to have endured more suffering than most of the others. He had been a victim of paralysis for thirty-eight years; and it was obvious that his will was as much paralyzed as his body. Lameness of the body is a difficult trial; but lameness of the will is ten times worse. The world is full of people whose bodies are disabled and lifeless because of disease, but whose minds and wills are so strong that they are lifted above most of humanity. The world is also full, sadly, with many beings who possess excellent health but whose fear and hopelessness paralyze the potential in their lives.

Christ fixes His eyes on the lame man and poses the question: "Do you want to be made well?" It is as if the lame man must confess his impotence before Christ could heal him. "Sir," the man responds, thinking that Jesus is offering to carry him in to the pool, "I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up." Christ has something far better to give him: "Rise, take up your bed, and walk." The words course through the man's body like an electric shock, bringing strength to the atrophied limbs, and

returning wholeness to the shattered constitution. Jesus soon meets the healed man in the temple, which was a short walk from the pool, where we can assume he has gone to offer his thanks to God. Christ says, "Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." He thus completes the inward healing. As he trusted and obeyed Christ to be physically cured, now let him repent and be morally cured. As in all of Christ's works, divine power passes from the external to the internal; it begins with the body, then moves on to the heart.

We must now ask an important question. Why did Christ bid the man to carry his bed? Since it was the Sabbath, and carrying any burden was forbidden by the Pharisees, why did the Lord make a point of it? Why did He not wait one more day to heal him, or at least warn him not to carry his bed till the next day? It was because the act of carrying the bed was what specifically attracted the notice of the Jewish authorities. Christ was, in fact, setting the stage for His first major encounter with the religious leaders of Jerusalem, and He was preparing for the first grand announcement of His nature and mission on earth. It was for this reason that St. John chose this miracle as one of the few "signs" to include in His gospel that displayed and proved Christ's divine Sonship. The fourth Evangelist did not adopt the style of the first three Gospels, that is, to compile a practical overview of Christ's life and teachings on earth. Rather, his intent was to record the gradual Self-Manifestation of His nature to the world, along with the gradual opposition and rejection by the Jewish nation.

Once the leaders discover that the command to carry the bed came from Jesus, they instantly approach and accuse Him of Sabbath-breaking. It was a relatively minor infraction, and they might have been willing to absolve Him so long as He admitted the fault. But they soon find themselves severely mistaken. Our Lord uses the opportunity to deliver to them a long and sublime discourse regarding His nature and work that takes up the remainder of the chapter. The discourse is, in fact, naturally connected to the miracle just performed. If we reverse their order, placing the discourse first and the miracle second, we will see that the miracle was intended as an illustration of the discourse; or conversely, the discourse was a commentary on the miracle. The two are actually part of the same message. Translate the miracle into words, and you have Christ's address to the Pharisees. Translate the address into deed, and you have the miracle at Bethesda.

"My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." This was Christ's response to the charge of Sabbath-breaking. They had taken God's "rest" on the 7th day of Creation as the model for their own Sabbaths. But, Christ implies, that rest did not mean inactivity or the cessation of God's work in the world. God continues to preserve and sustain the cosmos daily and hourly, regardless of the time or day. The earth continues to revolve, the tides rise and fall, the plants and animals continue their life cycles, all indifferent to human calendars. And in the same way, Christ, who is God's Son, continues His work of healing and repairing humanity regardless of the Sabbath. The logical conclusion the Jewish rulers derived from His words was that Christ's work and God's work were really the same thing; and so He and the Father were essentially one.

Their ears are shocked at such a thought; but if they had misunderstood Him, He would have said so. Instead, He goes on to continue His message with further points. The unity of work of Father and Son goes beyond healing. Christ even shares the Father's ability to raise the dead: "As the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so the Son gives life to whom He will." Furthermore, He shares the Father's prerogative to judge the world at the last day: "The Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son." These were very heavy claims to come from the a young Galilean prophet. The Jewish rulers could not believe their ears. This young man standing serenely before them, who spoke in soft human tones, said that it was His voice that would summon the dead from the graves and judge them all at the last day—as if His voice could take the place of God's! "Do not marvel at this," Christ told them, "I can do nothing of Myself." He explains the perfect unity of will between Father and Son, then devotes the rest of

the discourse to the three "witnesses" that the Jews should have believed—John the Baptist; Jesus' miracles; and the Scriptures.

This was the first instance in all the Gospels in which Christ reveals His true relationship to the Father; and by doing so He was paving the way to the Cross. For the words He uttered that day would eventually lead to the fatal charge of "blasphemy" that was hurled against Him by the Sanhedrim the night before His crucifixion (Matthew 26:65). And here we see that the miracle of Bethesda required—on the one hand, the glory of divine power—and on the other hand, the humility of self-sacrifice.

Christ's discourse to the Jews force the reader of the Gospels into a critical decision-making point: What will he or she believe about Christ? If He were a mere man, what should we think of these astonishing claims made about Himself? Can one honestly adopt the sketchy attitude of modern unbelievers, saying that He was wrong in saying such things, but was still a good man? Can one honestly think that the miracle at Bethesda was just a fabrication by the Evangelist, but that the Jesus depicted is still worthy of admiration? These are the cunningly false notions suggested by the unbelieving media of our times, which seeks to disembowel our faith without shocking our sensibilities. No mere man could take up the attitude of spiritual supremacy that Christ does in John 5 without shocking the world by his absurdity. Imagine any man, even a great religious man, saying things like, "I will raise all the dead," or "I will judge the entire world," or "I am the Way" to God. The world would be offended and disgusted by such pretensions.

But no one is offended by Jesus for saying these things. On the contrary, they have been the comfort and joy of all countries for two thousand years now; and the wisest and most civilized peoples of the earth, as well as the most humble and ignorant, have been pleased to humbly stoop at the feet of Jesus and become His disciples. Even in spite of the gigantic statements made by Christ regarding His Person, He is recognized by all—even among His enemies—to be a picture of the most touching humility. The Holy Bible calls Him the Lion of Judah, but the world recognizes Him more as the Lamb of God—gentle, lowly, tender-hearted. How can a human being make such claims to divinity and at the same time give such an impression of modesty? It can only be so if He is truly the Son of God.