
SIGNS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

THIRD SIGN (5:1-47)

A Certain Man Healed

By Arlen L. Chitwood

The third sign in John's gospel has to do with the healing of a man who had been sick for "a long time," for "thirty and eight years." And this healing occurred through a *manifestation of supernatural power, at the pool of Bethesda, on the Sabbath day.*

This pool was located near the sheep gate, which some have associated with the gate through which the paschal lambs were brought to the temple for sacrifice. The pool had five porches, and these porches were filled with sick or incapacitated individuals, described four different ways — "impotent" (*sick, with the Greek word denoting weakness wrought by the sickness*), "blind," "halt" (*lame*), and "withered" (*referring to those with shrunken parts of the body, resulting from disease*).

The entire scene speaks volumes about *Israel's spiritual condition at that time* (a condition in which the nation remains today, almost 2,000 years later). And that which occurred when Jesus appeared on the scene revealed how long Israel would continue in this condition, and that which would occur once this time had run its course.

The preceding sign in John's gospel — Jesus healing the nobleman's son in Cana of Galilee after spending two days in Samaria (the second sign) — deals with one aspect of the matter.

Then, the healing of the man who had been afflicted with an infirmity for thirty-eight years, on the Sabbath day (the third sign), deals with another aspect of the matter.

Both deal with *exactly the same thing*. Both deal with *Israel's present condition and future healing*, a healing which will occur after two days, on the third day (second sign), which is also that future time foreshadowed by the Sabbath day, the seventh day (third sign).

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Both of these signs were preceded by a miraculous sign performed at a wedding feast in Cana, which occurred on the third day in one respect (John 2:1) and on the seventh day in another (John 1:29, 35, 43; 2:1).

And the other five signs in John's gospel, as well, deal with different aspects of *the same thing*. All eight signs form different parts of *the same word picture*.

(Note how Scripture is structured in this respect, something seen throughout the Word. One event, or a sequence of events, is dealt with different ways at different times [via the use of types, parables, signs, metaphors, numbers, etc.]. God presents the matter from one vantage point, then another, then another... And sufficient information is given, through a means of this nature, to allow man to come into a clear and correct understanding of the subject under discussion.)

The Pool, the Five Porches, the Occupants

"Bethesda," the name of the pool near the sheep gate, is a Hebrew name meaning *house of mercy*; and "five [five porches]" is the number associated with *grace*. On these five porches, at this pool, lay "a great multitude" of sick and physically incapacitated individuals, waiting for a time when the water in the pool would be *stirred up, agitated* (v. 7; cf. vv. 3b, 4).

(The latter part of v. 3 ["waiting for the moving of the water," KJV] and all of v. 4 are not found in most of the older Greek manuscripts. Thus, they appear only in the footnotes of later English versions such as the NASB, NIV, and Weymouth's N.T. translation. Wuest would be an exception, retaining this section in the text of his translation.)

Good Bible teachers over about the past one hundred years have dealt with the authenticity or nonauthenticity of John 5:3b, 4 both ways.)

The scene in John 5:2, 3 — sick and incapacitated individuals lying on five porches at the pool of Bethesda, in need of healing — depicts *the Jewish people in a condition which would prevent them from functioning in the position for which God had originally called the nation*. With respect to the reason God called Israel into existence, the nation is depicted as being *unable to do anything other than lie around on that associated with grace, at the house of mercy, in need of healing*.

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And, while lying on the five porches in this condition, at the house of mercy, the nation is depicted as being *blind to their true condition*.

The Spirit of God moved Isaiah to begin his prophecy pertaining to Israel by presenting *exactly the same picture* concerning the nation, along with *the reason* for this existing condition:

"Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.

Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.

From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment" (Isa. 1:4-6).

This was the picture of Israel in Isaiah's day (eighth century B.C.); this remained the picture of Israel's condition when Christ was upon the earth during the first part of the first century A.D.; and this remains the picture of Israel's condition today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

There has been *no change in Israel's condition down through the centuries*, and there can be no change until the One Who has "torn" the nation *binds the nation's wound*, which will occur following repentance, which will take place "after two days...in the third day [which will be the *seventh day, the Sabbath*, counting from the beginning of Man's Day]" (Hosea 5:13-6:2).

And this is perfectly in keeping with the signs in John's gospel, the signs in the other three gospels, the signs in the Book of Acts, or any other place in Scripture bearing on the subject.

The Sign Itself

Isaiah 35:5, 6, a Messianic passage (vv. 1ff), states:

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert."

Isaiah had dealt with that which sin had wrought for both the people of Israel (sickness) and the land of Israel (desolation) as he opened his prophecy in the first chapter (vv. 2-7). But in the thirty-fifth chapter he writes about a time when healing would occur for both (as he had done in the latter part of the first chapter, leading into the second [1:16-19, 25-2:5]).

When Christ was on earth manifesting signs, the time of healing, spoken of centuries before by Isaiah, was "at hand [or, 'had drawn near']," *conditioned on Israel's national repentance* (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). All of the healings performed by Christ and His disciples (e.g., Matt. 4:23-25; 10:5-8; Luke 10:1, 8, 9, 17; Acts 3:1-8) formed *signs*, reflecting back on sections of Scripture such as Isa. 35:5, 6 and foreshadowed that which the nation *could have had* (conditioned on national repentance, which didn't occur) and which the nation *one day will have* (following national repentance, when it does occur).

The scene in John chapter five is that of sick and disabled Jews lying on five porches before a pool, waiting for a movement of the waters, with the hope that healing would be effected by the agitated waters. At the same time, *the One Who could heal them* stood in their midst, *offering healing*, but was being ignored.

Of all those present, Christ singled out one man in order to perform a supernatural sign for all to see, pointing to *healing available for all, if...*

After Thirty-Eight Years, on the Sabbath

The man Christ singled out and healed had been in his sick and weakened condition *for thirty-eight years*. "Thirty-eight," in this account, signifies *completeness* by pointing to the number *forty*.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture, it can only relate back to the time between the Israelites' arrival at Kadesh-Barnea under Moses (two years following the Exodus from Egypt) to that time when they were ready to enter the land under Joshua (thirty-eight years later [Deut. 2:14]). Thus, there is *a full forty years* between the Exodus from Egypt under Moses to that time when an entire generation had been overthrown (because of unbelief and disobedience) and *a new generation was ready to enter the land under Joshua, portending healing* (Acts 7:36).

1) Thirty-Eight, Forty Years

"Forty" is one of several numbers used in Scripture to signify *completeness* (*three, seven, ten, and twelve* are the others, with each pointing to *a particular type completeness*).

There was *a complete period of time* in which God dealt with the Israelites in history, at Kadesh-Barnea; and the third sign in John's gospel, drawing from Jewish history, foreshadows *a subsequent complete period of time* in which God would deal with His people, for exactly the same reason — *unbelief and disobedience*.

That which occurred following the experiences of the Israelites under Moses at Kadesh-Barnea had to do with the Jewish people being unable to enter into the land until *a full forty years* had run its course.

At the end of forty years they were allowed to enter the land under Joshua, with the theocracy previously established at Sinai then being established in the land (a theocracy existed in the camp of Israel from the time that the Glory filled the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle at Sinai to that time when the Glory departed from the Holy of Holies of the temple almost two decades after the beginning of the Babylonian captivity — about eight and one-half centuries [cf. Ex. 40:34; Joshua 3:13, 17; 4:18; Ezek. 10:4, 18; 11:22, 23; 43:2-5]).

And Christ healing the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5:1-9 (representing all in need of healing on the five porches at the pool) foreshadowed that which the Israelites under Joshua, over fourteen centuries earlier, had also foreshadowed. Both foreshadowed *the Israelites ultimately being healed and being able to enter the land under Jesus* ("Joshua" and "Jesus" are the same name, Hebrew and Greek), with the theocracy to be restored to Israel at that future time when the Jewish people have been reestablished in the land.

And this will not only occur after the complete period of time set forth by the full forty years but it will also occur during that time, as seen in the sign, on the Sabbath day, the seventh day, the seventh 1,000-year period introduced in the septenary arrangement of time in Gen. 1:1-2:3.

(Note also that the first man healed in the Book of Acts, as *a continuing sign for the nation of Israel*, had been "lame from his mother's womb" and he was "above forty years old" at the time this miraculous healing occurred [Acts 3:2; 4:22].)

2) The Sabbath

The Sabbath, introduced in Scripture in Gen. 2:1-3, forms the closing day of the septenary structure of days with which God chose to open His Word. The Sabbath later formed the fifth and longest of the ten commandments given to Israel under Moses (Ex. 20:8-11). The Sabbath was then later stated to be "*a sign between me [God] and the children of Israel forever*" (Ex. 31:13-17).

The Israelites were to work for six days and then rest the seventh, exactly as God was doing and would yet do at a future time, based on the pattern set forth in the opening section of Genesis.

God, since Adam's day, extending into present time, has been/is working six days (6,000 years) in a subsequent restoration of a ruined creation to that seen in the first chapter of Genesis (that of restoring ruined man). And God, in exact accord with the established pattern will rest a day (1,000 years) at the conclusion of His work. And the Sabbath given to Israel, following six days of work, reflects back on that seen in the opening two chapters of Genesis.

Reference is made back to this section of Genesis in both *the fifth commandment* in Exodus chapter twenty and *the sign of the Sabbath* in Exodus chapter thirty-one. Then note in Hebrews 4:9 that "*a rest [Gk., Sabbatismos, 'Sabbath rest']*" awaits the people of God, and reference is once again made back to the opening two chapters of Genesis (vv. 3, 4).

Thus, the third sign in John's gospel was performed on a day which itself formed *a sign*. The Sabbath was given to Israel as *a sign*, to keep the thought ever before the nation, that God was going to work six more days in man's restoration (which would include healing for the nation) and then rest a seventh day.

And this would occur in complete accordance with the previously established pattern in Gen. 1:1-2:3, in complete accordance with the same pattern seen in the opening two chapters of John's gospel (referring more particularly to man's restoration in John's gospel).

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