

Healing At Bethesda

During 2005 the book *The DaVinci Code* climbed to the top of the New York Times bestseller's list. The author, Dan Brown, stated on the opening page of his book that "all descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate." However, Ben Witherington III responded in his book *The Gospel Code*, "Our concern isn't so much with Brown's ability to describe art or architecture accurately . . . but with his handling of ancient documents and his treatment of early Christian history. In these realms he is . . . a purveyor of errors of both fact and interpretation, including some mistakes that even the amateur student of religious history should never make" (p. 16). In short, Dan Brown presented a number of significant errors as if they were fact. One of those errors is that the earliest historical documents never claimed that Jesus was God until the Council of Nicea. Mr. Brown stated that Jesus was only a great man or a prophet (pp. 231-234). Mr. Brown has claimed to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, and yet he is not aware of what Jesus declared about Himself.

Such comments are not new because even the religious leaders of Jesus' day denied that He was God. They knew that Jesus declared He was God, but they just could not accept His statements as being true. Even though we seem to be more educated and live in technologically superior times, individuals choose to ignore what even the early doubters knew was true. We will discover in this study that Jesus did in fact declare that He was God - statements that some religious leaders have not accepted and still are unwilling to accept.

THE SETTING. When we come to our study in John 5:1-18, a gap in time has occurred.

After these things there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. (NASB) John 5:1

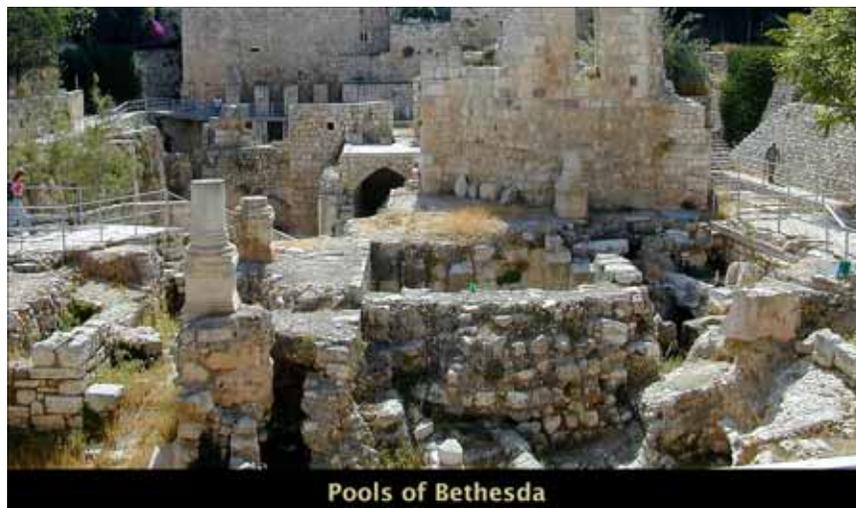
"After these things" tells us that time has passed, but we do not know how long it has been since Levi or Matthew gave his party for Jesus. Weeks or months may have passed. So the feast that John refers to is not Matthew's party. It is the annual Passover Feast which was celebrated once a year in Jerusalem. This is the second Passover Feast that John has told us about. The first one occurred in John 2:13. This means that Jesus has been ministering for at least one year. It is very possible that

Jesus has been ministering for about 1.5 years when we arrive at the events being described by the Apostle John.

We are told that Jesus "went up" to Jerusalem because the city was at a higher elevation than where He had been. He was in Galilee in our last study. When Jesus arrived in the city, it was Sunday (v. 9); and He came to a place where many who were sick, blind, lame, and withered were waiting to be healed.

Now there is in Jerusalem by the sheep gate a pool, which is

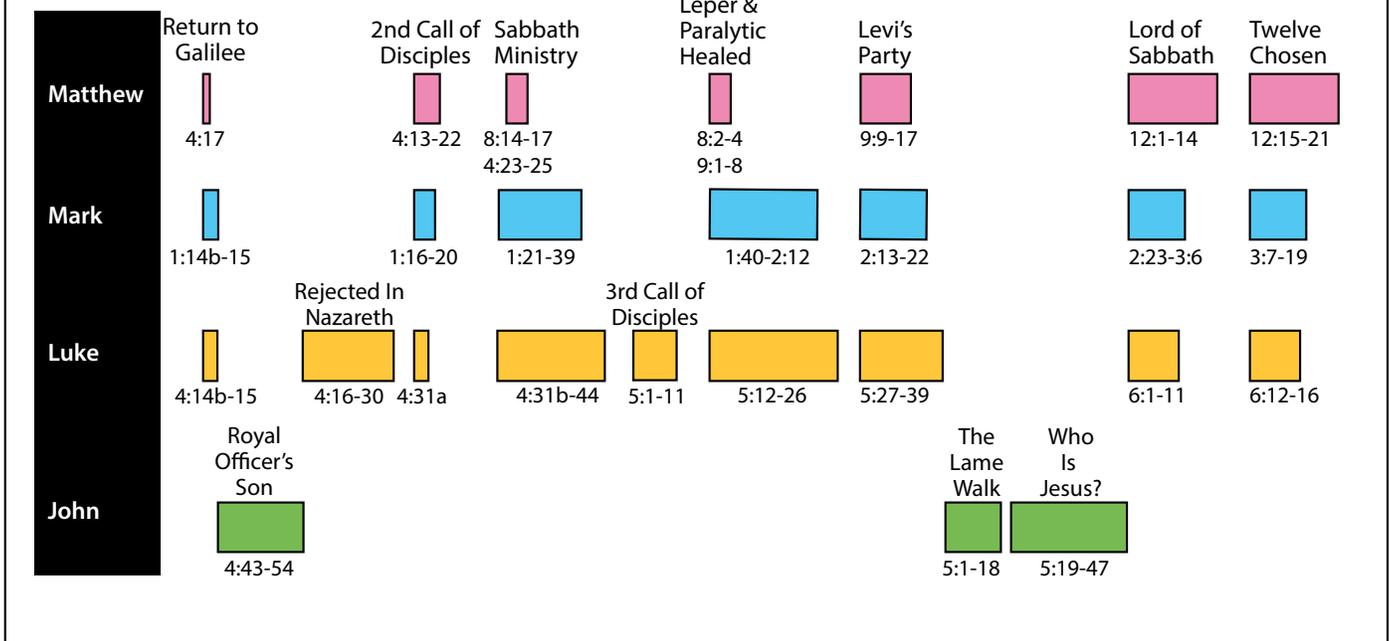
called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered . . . (NASB) John 5:2-3



The place was called Bethesda or "house of mercy." It contained a pool which was located near the

Life and Heart of Jesus

Jesus' Ministry in Galilee (Mid A.D. 31)



Sheep Gate. The pool area was covered with five porticoes. The porticoes were covered areas where the ill would lie and wait. We will discover in the following verses that they were waiting under the porticoes because they believed that a person could be healed when the pool water was “stirred” (v. 7). So when the waters were stirred, there was a race to be the first one into the water.

PASSAGE IN DOUBT. Before we continue with our study, we must stop and examine the next one and one-half verses. All of the major Bible translations place the following words in brackets or indicate in some way that the words are in doubt.

... waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted. (NASB) John 5:3-4

It appears that this passage might not belong in our Bibles because it has not been found in any of the ancient manuscripts before the fourth century A.D. That is, there is

strong evidence that these words were inserted by someone about 300 years after the gospel of John was written in order to help us understand the passage. It was someone’s commentary about the pool. Therefore, it is highly doubtful that the words were written by the Apostle John. For anyone who is interested in a further discussion about the accuracy of our Bible and how scholars determine which words and verses belong in the Bible, you might be interested in the study called “How Accurate Is The Bible?” Now back to our study.

THE MAN. When Jesus arrived at Bethesda, He saw many people, yet He went over to only one man - a man who could not walk. He apparently went to the most helpless of them all.

A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, “Do you wish to get well?” The sick man answered Him, “Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me.” (NASB) John 5:5-7

The man had been in this condition for 38 years. When Jesus finally stood next to him, the man was asked if he would like to get well. Jesus' question was a strange one. Of course, the man wanted to get well. He had been waiting there at the pool for a long time with the goal of getting well. So why did Jesus word His question the way He did? Why did Jesus ask him if he wanted to get well?

The man's reply to Jesus gives us the answer to our question. The man explained that every time the water was "stirred up," he was not able to get into the water in time. Each time there was a race to be the first one into the pool. It was one person against another. Each time it had been a race, and each time he had lost. He must have been very discouraged, and by now he was very determined to be the next one in.

If you had lost each time, what would you be doing if you had been that man? Would you be looking around? Would you be talking with others or reading? Or, would you have had your eyes fixed on the pool and looking for the next time it stirred? If I had been

that man, I would have been watching the pool all the time and as soon as the water was "stirred up" I would have tried to be the first one in the water. I would have also been as close as I could be to the pool. I think that is exactly what this man was doing. He was as close as he could be to the pool. His eyes were fixed on the water; Jesus was standing there, but the man did not realize that the one who could heal him was asking him a question. It appears that the question was asked to get the man's attention off of the pool and onto Jesus.

The lame man was so busy focusing on his own problem that He missed Jesus - the one who could help him. Most of

us, including the author, are just like this man. We become so focused on our problem and our own approach to solving the problem that we get our eyes off of God. We might pray, but God is really our back-up plan. In our pursuit to solve our situation, Jesus sometimes becomes our second option, our security blanket. In these situations, our eyes can become focused on the "pool" while we ignore the One who is standing next to us, until we hear the words, "Do you wish to get well?"

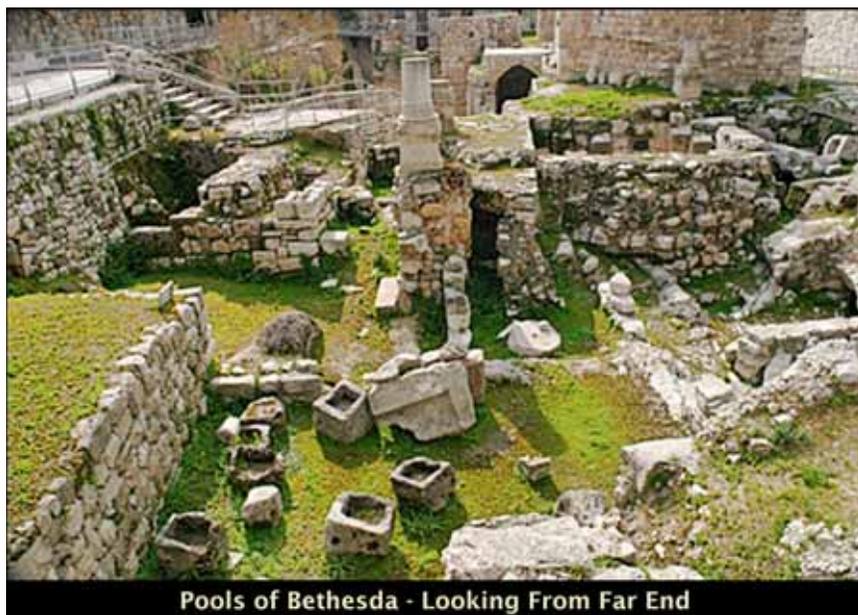
For some of us "pool of water" is problems at home and we focus on them. So we look to Ann Landers, Dr. Laura Schlesinger, or some secular book, or to psychologists for advice and we miss the Words of Life (the Bible) written by the Counselor of counselors. For some of us the "pool of

water" is a problem with church leaders or with a pastor and we have forgotten that the Shepherd of shepherds is standing there offering guidance. It is easy to complain about a job situation and forget that God is our ultimate employer. It is He who gave us the job. It is He who really

gives us the promotion. It is He who really gives us the pay increase. And it is easy to fix our attention on doctors and become demanding that they heal us, and we sometimes miss the fact that the Healer of healers will select us out of the multitude who are by the pool and will walk up to us when He is ready and ask, "Do you wish to get well?" All God wants is our focus to be on Him and not the pool.

GET UP. Jesus' reply to the man's complaint was simple and quick, "Get up!"

Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk." Immediately the man became well, and picked up his pallet and began



Pools of Bethesda - Looking From Far End

to walk. (NASB) John 5:8-9a

Get up and walk! Jesus' command was easy to understand. There were no more questions, no conversation - just a command, "Get up!" Immediately, the man stood up, picked up his pallet, and walked!

When God heals, He heals. When God fixes a problem in the church, at work, or in our soul, He fixes the problem. He knows the right solution. He knows what is best for us. He has given us the answers in His book - the Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that the Bible has given us everything that we need to know for our spiritual life.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (NASB) 2 Tim. 3:16-17

The answers are found there.

OUR RULES WERE BROKEN. Jesus had healed this man, and the Jewish religious leaders were not happy that Jesus had healed this man on a Sabbath day.

Now it was the Sabbath on that day. So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Pick up your pallet and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pick up your pallet and walk?'" But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. (NASB) John 5:9b-13

At first the religious leaders challenged the man about carrying his pallet. When the man explained that the one who had healed him told him to carry his pallet, the religious leaders were upset with the unknown healer. Most likely they suspected that it was Jesus. The religious leaders were heartless. They did not rejoice that the man had been healed. They were only interested in the fact that someone had told the man to carry his pallet on a Sabbath. Who cares that he was healed!

Why did they react this way? The answer is found in their wrong interpretation of Exodus 20:10 where God had commanded them not to work on the Sabbath day. For centuries the Jews had correctly understood God's command about working on the Sabbath as Nehemiah 13 proves. In that passage Nehemiah said this,



Pools of Bethesda - Looking From The Side To The Far End

In those days I saw in Judah some who were treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sacks of grain and loading them on donkeys, as

well as wine, grapes, figs and all kinds of loads, and they brought them into Jerusalem on the sabbath day. So I admonished them on the day they sold food. Also men of Tyre were living there who imported fish and all kinds of merchandise, and sold them to the sons of Judah on the sabbath, even in Jerusalem. Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, "What is this evil thing you are doing, by profaning the sabbath day? (NASB) Neh. 13:15-17

That was the type of work that God had encouraged them not to do. But the Pharisees missed the point and established hundreds of detailed rules. The Mishnah, their oral law, cat-

alogues many rules that every Jew was to keep. Some of the rules said that a woman could not place a pin on her dress or wear jewelry because that would be work. She would be carrying something. A woman could not look in a mirror because she might be tempted to remove a gray hair and that would be work. A man could not wear wooden shoes with nails or phylacteries, or scrap his shoes. If a person's false teeth fell out, no one could put them back in because that would be work. This is just a sampling of their list of rules. They had missed the point that Nehemiah well understood.

They were imposing rules that God had not imposed and had violated God's law of love and compassion. God's laws are designed for our good. It is like a father establishing rules for his children.

SICKNESS AND SIN. After the man and the religious leaders had finished their discussion, the man left them and found Jesus.



Pools of Bethesda - Looking From the Side To The Opposite End

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. (NASB) John 5:14-15

It is important to notice the warning that Jesus gave this man, ". . . do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." This is a reminder that sometimes we are sick because we have sinned. If God heals us but we have not learned our spiritual lesson, another illness may come along later which is much worse. This is an important lesson for us. "Go and sin no more!"

After the man discovered that Jesus had healed him, he returned to the religious leaders and informed them that

Jesus had healed him. It is unbelievable that this man did this to Jesus. Surely, the man knew why the religious leaders wanted to know who had told him to pick up his pallet. But the man reported on Jesus anyway. What a thankless heart from one who could now walk after 38 years!

As a result, the Jewish leaders started persecuting Jesus.

For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. (NASB) John 5:16

This form of persecution was not physical but verbal persecution. This is a great reminder that many followers of Jesus have been persecuted - not just martyrs. Christians today are increasingly being persecuted around the world. The Pharisees were angry that Jesus had been healing on the Sabbath, eating on the Sabbath, and now was encouraging others to violate their Sabbath laws.

I AM GOD. In their anger the Jewish leaders searched for Jesus, found Him, and confronted Him.

But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. (NASB) John 5:17-18

It appears from Jesus' response that they might have commanded Jesus to stop performing miracles and teaching, because Jesus tells them that He is working just like the Father is working. Jesus was not going to stop.

Jesus was also telling them that He was God and they knew it. They understood Jesus' words to mean exactly that - Jesus was God. So it is not surprising that these religious leaders wanted to kill Him. They did not like what He taught or did, He refused to stop, and now He declared that He was God. They must have been furious with rage.

CONCLUSION. Today, men and women do not like what Jesus taught and did either. Some like Jesus because they do not really know what Jesus taught. But others who understand that Jesus declared that He was God believe that He went too far and just like the unbelieving Pharisees, they want to "kill" Him from the pages of books, movies, newspapers, and television. So it is not surprising that Dan

Brown wrote the book that he wrote. During an interview he revealed himself when he said the following words.

"I consider myself a student of many religions. The more I learn, the more questions I have. For me, the spiritual quest will be a life-long work in progress" (http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides3/da_vinci_code2.asp).

Mr. Brown considers himself a student to many religions and yet claims to be a Christian. But it is not possible to be a follower of Jesus if you reject what He declared about Himself. The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus' statements too - that He was God!