

The Pool of Bethesda

In the Gospel of John, chapter 5 there is an interesting story about a man who had been ill for 38 years who was lying beside a pool called Bethesda along with a multitude of other sick people. They were all gathered there in hopes of being healed according to an ancient legend that occasionally an angel would stir the waters, and the first one in the pool would be healed. Jesus entered this scene of many sick, blind, and lame desperately staring at the water in the pool waiting for a ripple so they could crawl, stumble, and fall into the pool. It would be funny if it weren't so pitiful. Can you imagine the competition when the wind blew up? For reasons made clearer later in the story, Jesus chose one guy to heal out of all the multitude. The guy did not ask him, the guy did not exhibit any faith, and in verse 15 the guy even "ratted out" Jesus to the religious leaders for working on the Sabbath. I challenge you to read the story, and figure out why Jesus would choose that guy. The best clue is given at the end of verse 9, "Now it was the Sabbath on that day." Jesus purposefully did this great work on the Sabbath in order to force a confrontation with the religious leaders. In the resulting confrontation, Jesus was given the opportunity to reveal who He is, the Son of God who came from Heaven to do the will of God, speak the words of God, and perform the works of God. In John 5:32-47, Jesus gave four proofs or testimonies of who He is.

The Sheep Gate, St. Anne's Church, and the Pool of Bethesda

One of my favorite places in the whole world is St. Anne's Church which can be found in Old Jerusalem just inside the Sheep Gate and right next to the excavation of the Pool of Bethesda. Until the 19th century, no one knew where the Pool was located so skeptics used that to doubt John's account. Today there can be no doubt this is the location where Jesus healed the lame man. John wrote of the pool having five porticoes, and today we can see the remains of the colonnades that supported them.

The pool goes way back to the building of a dam across a drainage area there to retain rainwater back in the 8th century BC, creating a pool. Later a second dam was added, and it became part of the water supply for the nearby Temple. The whole site was destroyed by the Roman capture of Jerusalem in 70 AD. In 135 AD, Roman Emperor Hadrian built a healing sanctuary dedicated to the Egyptian healing god Serapis. Apparently the healing legend continued. When the Byzantine Empire was building churches on all the holy Christian sites, the pagan sanctuary was knocked down and a Byzantine church was built. This church was destroyed by the Muslims. When the Crusaders took Jerusalem they tore down the Muslim stuff and built St. Anne's Church in 1140 AD. After the re-conquest of Jerusalem by Salah el-Din in 1189 AD, the church became a school for Islamic Law. After the Crimean War in 1856,

the Sultan of Istanbul gave St. Anne's Church to France as a token of recognition for France's help in the war. France gave it to the Order of the White Fathers of the Catholic Church to administer, and they still operate it to this day. Now that is some history!

Why is it called St. Anne's, or who is Anne? The Crusaders believed that a grotto they discovered next to the Pool was the virgin Mary's birthplace, and the home of her parents Anne and Joachim. They then built the church over the grotto and named it for Jesus' grandmother, Anne. If you are really on your toes, you will be asking, "Wait a minute, where in the Bible are we told the names of Mary's parents and where she was born?" Correct, the New Testament does not mention anything about the birth of Mary. That did not stop the Crusaders who must have had a very aggressive tour guide. There is an ancient tradition recorded in an apocryphal gospel written at the end of the 2nd century AD (130 years after the Bible) that gave that information (the author probably owned real estate in the area). Nevertheless, the Byzantines bought into this legend in 450 AD when they built their church, and again much later the Crusaders ate it up in 1140 AD.

You have to hand it to the Crusaders because they knew how to build a church with awesome acoustics. The reason that millions of tourists visit this church every year, and I would not miss it for the world is that when someone with a good voice sings in this church you get a taste of Heaven. As someone in our group said, "It pervades your being, when they were singing the very heavens seemed to ring!"

What do We Actually Know?

We do not know if this was the site of Mary's birth or even who her parents were, but we do know the incredibly rich history of this site and the succession of things built on it. The Pool of Bethesda is right next to the church, and about 50 feet below ground level. It was excavated by archeologists in the 19th century. The remains are exactly like the Apostle John described it. It had to be excavated because so many things were built on top of it over 1900 years. The Pool was also called the Sheep Pool because the Priests administering the Temple used it as a water supply to wash the "unblemished lambs" for Passover. They brought the sheep in the gate on the northeast side of the old city of Jerusalem which was called the "sheep gate". Later the Muslims renamed that gate the "Lion's Gate", and put carvings of lions on the wall there.

The Old City of Jerusalem was surrounded by a 40-50 foot wall. The wall that existed during the time of Christ is below ground, but the current wall surrounding Old Jerusalem was built by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1542 when the Ottoman Empire controlled it. Today, the Lion's Gate (or sheep gate) marks the beginning of the traditional Christian observance of the

last walk of Jesus from prison to execution, this walk is called the Via Dolorosa which means in Latin, “the way of suffering”.

Biblical Significance

Jesus chose this site at the Pool of Bethesda to reveal to the people of Jerusalem, and now to us, that He is the Lord of the Sabbath. They persecuted Him and asked him by what right He had worked on the Sabbath by healing someone. Jesus let them know that He was doing the work of God, “My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.” The religious leaders were seeking to kill Him because He not only was breaking the Sabbath laws, but also making Himself equal with God. In the following discourse recorded in John 5:19-47, Jesus clarified and defended His divine authority. JESUS WAS THE LORD OF THE SABBATH, He wrote it and governed it therefore it was impossible for Him to break it.

John 5:1-47

This is a pretty wild story because we have a superstitious man wasting his time for 38 years trying to be healed. In verse 6 Jesus asked him what seemed to be an obvious question, “Do you wish to get well?” This guy was clearly set in his ways, superstitious, and a known sinner. We are used to hearing, “Why do bad things happen to good people?”, but here the question is “Why did a good thing happen to a bad person?” This guy is relying on men not God, he was unappreciative, and he betrayed Jesus. Frankly, this guy well represents the human race: 1.He is ready to believe what is untrue, 2.He relies on self or other men, and 3.He is stubborn and unappreciative. Jesus purposefully chose this guy out of hundreds of others so He could confront the establishment, draw them out, reveal the error of their traditions, and reveal that they chose to reject the Son of God. The insanity of this rejection was revealed by three awesome miracles in John 5, 9, 11, and then climaxed in the crucifixion. They were concerned with tradition and the Law of Moses, but the God of love, mercy, and compassion gave the Law as a standard of God’s righteousness. The law was good, but men corrupted it. They were not concerned with love, mercy, or compassion, only the strict letter of the law. The irony was that they allowed for complicated ways to get around the law—loopholes so that the knowledgeable (them) could get away with anything. The Pharisees were like a lawyer who convinces two men to strip down and fight, and then he walked off with their clothes.

Four Proofs of the Deity of Christ

In John 5:30-47 Jesus gave four corroborating proofs that what He was saying was true. These were four unimpeachable sources. First of all, the respected and well followed prophet John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus. Secondly, the works Jesus did were the works of God. The miracles that Jesus was doing every day in His ministry could only have been done by God.

Thirdly, the Scriptures bear witness of Jesus. The authors of the Gospels all consistently recorded that Jesus was the promised one of all the O.T. prophets, and He fulfilled their prophecies. Finally Jesus referred to the man who recorded God's Law that they claimed to be following, Moses. Jesus made the religious leaders very unhappy by saying, "if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote of Me; but if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" Their law said you had to have 2 or 3 witnesses to confirm a claim, but Jesus gave them four unimpeachable sources of testimony, so they stood condemned.

Men want to revere superstitions, legends, laws, buildings, places, trees, icons, and other people; but Jesus alone came from Heaven to say the Words of God and to do the works of God. Therefore let us believe in Him, follow Him, and revere Him only. When we think of biblical sites, give all glory and honor to God for sending His Son to save us.

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