

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## The signs in John's Gospel: Signs 3, 4 and 5

"Actions speak louder than words!", so goes the well known saying. In the Gospel of John, Jesus provided the clearest confirmation of His right to be recognised as the Messiah through the signs that He performed. Last week we saw Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-11) indicating the real, lasting joy that Jesus alone is able to give. He then goes on to heal the nobleman's son (John 4:46-54) to confirm His promise of a blessing available to all.

This morning we come to the next three signs in the Gospel, signs that help us to understand the nature of the Lord Jesus, and the character of the new life that He has come to give. We shall begin by considering the healing of the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15), and the power for living that Jesus gives. Next, we shall consider the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14), and how this demonstrates Jesus' ability to amply provide. Finally, we shall think about Jesus walking on the water (John 6:15-21) and the demonstration of the peace that Jesus gives to those who come to Him.

### The Third Sign: The healing of the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15)

Let us read together from John 5:1-9, 14: *"After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had. Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, 'Do you want to be made 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.' Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk.' And immediately the man was made well, took up his bed, and walked. And that day was the Sabbath ... Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, 'See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you.'"*

Just to the north of the temple precinct were the twin pools of Bethesda surrounded by the five porches that provided cover for a variety of diseased folk who were hoping for a miracle in the waters there. One of the unfortunate folk who waited there was a crippled man who had been in that condition for 38 years. What a picture he is of mankind in general, utterly unable to help himself! Note, I say, **unable**, not unwilling. There was a real desire in the heart of this man to be made well, but every time the waters were stirred, someone more mobile than he would always get into the water first. He did not have the ability to be made well, due to his condition. We see this so often see in humanity, in general. There is a desire for improvement but no power to effect such. People will try all sorts of different ways in a genuine attempt to improve the human condition - politics, charity work, self-help groups etc. However, there is no power to produce a lasting change, and any attempt can only end in frustration.

There is a moral lesson for us, as well, in this crippled man. Number connections in the Bible are often instructive. We read of 38 years elsewhere in the Bible, in fact, in Deuteronomy 2:14, where we read of Israel being camped around Kadesh Barnea. In faithless disobedience, Israel had refused to go in to the promised land (Deuteronomy 1:19-46) and so they were consigned to a wilderness existence until such time as all those responsible adults had died. Sin and disobedience could only lead to death, and the law could do nothing to bring salvation, but could only mutely condemn. In healing the crippled man, Jesus was in effect saying that He was bringing a new power to release man from the deadening power of sin and the futile attempts to keep the law. I believe that this is why, in John 5:14, Jesus told the man to *"sin no more"* (John 5:14), which indicated that his illness was in some measure a result of a specific sin. That was highly unusual in the ministry of Jesus. Interestingly, the man healed by Peter and John soon after Pentecost, on the opposite side of the temple precinct (Acts 3:1-10) had been in such a state for over forty years, the time of Israel's wilderness journey (see Numbers 32:13). Faith in Christ had come to replace the old system of law keeping as the way in to God's presence.

So, Jesus asks the man if he would like to be made well (John 5:6). We might think that an odd question! Surely there could only be one answer!! There was no fault in Jesus' understanding of the situation. However, there was on the part of the man. For sure, in theory, the man wanted to be made well. But he was probably so downcast and resigned

to the hopelessness of his situation, that in his heart he did not truly believe that there was any hope for himself. Sometimes we might find ourselves in just such a state. In our heads we would agree that Jesus is able to revive His Church, or come again or deliver us from such and such a situation, or bring about other good things, but in our hearts we have resigned ourselves to seeing none of these things happen. In effect, Jesus was saying "Right here and right now, do you want to put that belief that I can heal on the line?" The crippled man would look mighty stupid if this was just a wind up.

But we never can lose out when we simply obey Jesus. The directness of Jesus' command to the man left no margin for misunderstanding. Immediately there was power in the man's once wasted limbs (John 5:9). Have you ever felt a bit wobbly after a day or two in bed, perhaps after some illness? Well, there was none of that here! Such is the all sufficiency of Jesus' grace that even after 38 years of inactivity, the muscles of the man's legs respond immediately to the voice of the Creator. Not only in salvation from sin, but also in daily salvation until such time that we are taken to Heaven, there is real power in obeying the voice of Jesus. Sometimes we make life so complicated, trying to reason and analyse everything, when all we need to do is obey, and allow God to work.

#### **The Fourth Sign: The feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-14)**

But we must move on and look now at the fourth sign that John gives us. In this, we shall see the wonderful provision of God. Let us read together from John 6:1-14: *"After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near. Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?' But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. Philip answered Him, 'Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.' One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, 'There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?' Then Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted. So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, 'Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.' Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.'"*

This well known miracle of the Lord hardly needs any introduction. However, what it does show us clearly is the wonderful provision there is in Christ, not only to save us but also to keep us.

Philip was a local lad (see John 1:44), who should have known where it was possible to get enough food to feed such a large crowd, if such a thing were possible. However, he has to admit that humanly speaking, they were in a jam, if you will excuse the pun. In terms of our salvation, we are completely unable to work to save ourselves, but also as believers, in our own strength we can do nothing to help God. However, we do see the way in which God is able to use us. We have a young boy who was willing to give what he had to Jesus (John 6:9). It might not have been much but he was ready to give it all away. Such unstinting sacrifice is always acceptable to God. But he was not the only one who gave here. Who had made the boy's picnic? Based on personal experience, I guess it was his mother. Little did she think, as she performed her housebound chores that what she was doing would become of global renown! And who had paid for the picnic? Probably the boy's dad, who in the performance of his everyday work, drab and monotonous as it may have been, had provided the food for the world's greatest feast. There ought to be real encouragement for us in this. So often we may feel that we are doing nothing of importance. But if we do what we do with a readiness to give to others, then who knows what God can do with that? This story depended upon these ordinary folk going about their ordinary business. Let us never despise this in the things of God!

What we see from this miraculous meal now is the way in which Jesus takes up the ordinary extraordinarily. Having given thanks to God, for the food, for the boy, for his parents, for the people, Jesus distributes the loaves and fishes via His disciples and feeds the whole crowd so that all have enough with more to spare (John 6:12-13). There is abundant provision in the grace of God. What a wonderful illustration of His own words in John 10:10: *"I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."*

It appears to me that the 21st century curse is one of filling our lives with emptiness, in much the same way that a balloon is inflated with nothing but air. We try so hard to achieve things, to possess things, to learn things, that we never really allow God to show us that the only real satisfaction is to be had in receiving from Him. John Piper would term this as Christian hedonism - the pursuit of happiness can only be fruitful if it is focused on Him. A full and satisfying life can only be enjoyed as we make the time to be found in His presence. Imagine for a moment what happened to one in the crowd, who after a few hours of listening to Jesus, began to think that he was getting hungry. Quite reasonably, he might have thought that he ought to go, so that he would have time to get to the local baker's to

buy some food. And in all his sensibleness he would have missed out on the magnificent provision of God! Paul would later describe such a change in emphasis in life, in Philippians 3:7-10: *"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord ... that I may know Him."* Perhaps this morning you may be feeling that life is not very satisfying, that it is somehow less than you feel it ought to be. Well, the message of this fourth sign is that Jesus alone is able to provide, and to do so in such a way that is wonderfully abundant to all who desire His company.

I guess that the other lesson we learn from this account is that He provides the right individual at the right time, and in the right place. What if the boy had been a greedy-guts, who had scoffed his picnic as soon as the Lord had begun to teach? Or what if the boy had offered his picnic too soon, and Andrew had not then perceived the need of it? One of life's hardest lessons is that of realising that the Lord Jesus is in control of all things - good and, yes, even bad. In His sovereignty, He is working out His purposes, in just the way that He wants to. Little did the boy realise that he was drawn to the Saviour that day, and that it would lead to such momentous events. We can so often become anxious with the affairs of life that we lose sight of His working. For not only is there power in Him, power to give new life, but also power to live the new life; not only is there abundant provision for the new life in Him, but also there is peace to guard the new life.

### **The Fifth Sign: Jesus walking on the water (John 6:15-21)**

Finally, it is this fifth sign that illustrates for us most clearly, the wonderful peace that is to be found in Him. So let us read John 6:15-21: *"Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone. Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, got into the boat, and went over the sea toward Capernaum. And it was already dark, and Jesus had not come to them. Then the sea arose because a great wind was blowing. So when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near the boat; and they were afraid. But He said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.' Then they willingly received Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land where they were going."*

From a comparison of the other Gospel accounts of this incident, we will realise that this was the time when Jesus invited Peter to get out of the boat and walk to Him on the water (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52). Now, we may not have had the experience of being in a small boat in the middle of a storm and not making much progress, but we might all be able to associate with the disciples in finding their circumstances difficult and frightening. It is into these circumstances that Jesus Himself comes. The disciples immediately apply the false logic of reason to conclude that Jesus is no more than an apparition (Matthew 14:26; Mark 6:49). So Jesus challenges them as to where their faith should be placed. Until now, their faith was in their boat, and in their own ability to ride out the storm. That faith, when tested, had proved wanting! Jesus tells Peter to come to Him (Matthew 14:29), as proof of His reality, and to his great credit, Peter gets out of the boat (Matthew 14:29). Again, we see the timeless reality that simple obedience to Him is always the best course of action. One wonders what might have happened to the other disciples left in the boat had Peter remained focused on the Lord. They clung to their perceived safety, and how foolish they would have felt had the Lord and Peter just walked off and left them! Jesus would in like manner call us all to leave behind our earth bound securities, in exchange for the lasting peace and safety that lies in closeness with Him. What could possibly happen to Peter if he was hand in hand with the One who holds the oceans in the palm of His hand! My peace ought not to lie in the fact that I have a healthy bank balance and a good job, or that modern medicine is discovering new cures year by year. That is not to say that I will just give up my job, or that I won't take a paracetamol for a headache or go and see the doctor if I am ill. God most usually chooses to work through these ordinary commonsense ways, for He has made us and given us that sense. But beyond these things, I know that He is able to provide all that I need, even when other human agencies cannot. It is not until Jesus Himself gets into their boat that they find peace in their circumstances.

It has been well said that "closeness to Christ is a position that is taken and not given." It is not for the privileged few that He chooses. No! Closeness to Him, and the benefit of His peace that that brings is open to any and all that would take that position. And it is by faith that we can occupy a position of nearness to Him. Faith has to be applied and acted upon. It is not a passive quality that acts as a safety net, but is something that needs to be worked out in our lives.

In our garage, on our central heating boiler, we have a frost thermostat. So if it ever gets really cold, which is unusual for lovely Liverpool, the heating comes on automatically. Now faith is not like the thermostat. It doesn't automatically spring into action as soon as we are in spiritual danger. Faith is the continual putting down of doubt. Peter had to reason it out: "Jesus has told me to get out of the boat and I've never got into trouble before doing what He says, and He loves me and would not want me to get hurt, and He has told me He has a future purpose for me, so even though I have never walked on water before, it must be ok."

Sadly, it was when Peter took his eyes off the Lord that he got into trouble, by looking at what was around him, rather than Who was with him (Matthew 14:30). The writer to the Hebrews tells us exactly what we need to do to remain in this atmosphere of godly peace that He gives, in Hebrews 12:2: *"Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith."*

Most believers have enough of Christ in them to spoil the world and enough of the world in them to spoil Christ. It can only be as we obey Him, like the crippled man, and as we give to Him, like the boy, and as we look to Him, like Peter, that we will experience the power, the provision and the peace of God that will make this life now to be God honouring and truly self pleasing.

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