

John Chapter 5

Everything that we read in John's gospel is full of meaning. It was written perhaps 50 years after the other three gospels. It is a thoughtful and mature gospel, written to emphasise the deity of the Lord Jesus. It is also a gospel in which two thirds of the 21 chapters take place in Jerusalem, where the Lord comes into confrontation with the leaders of the Jewish religion.

Being a mature gospel written well into the Christian era, it is going to challenge the old established ways of Judaism, and I think this is how this first part of chapter 5 fits unto the picture. It takes place in Jerusalem, by the pool of Bethesda.

Let's go back to chapter 3. The Lord has a visitor one evening. It is a man called Nicodemus. He is an important man in Judaism. He is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews, a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrim. He is also a teacher of Israel, as well as being a man of some wealth. He was obviously a well respected member of the Jewish community. He has heard about a man called Jesus of Nazareth, that He had done many miracles. Unlike many of his colleagues, he had not dismissed this Jesus as some kind of imposter or deceiver. He came with an open mind to discuss this man's miracles with Him. "No man can do these miracles which Thou doest except God be with Him". He came expecting a long discussion with this Jesus about His miracles. How surprised he must have been when Jesus says to him, "Ye must be born again".

What was he being told? Surely that he needed a fresh start, a new life whose origin was not in the flesh but in the Spirit.

How different is the scene that confronts us in chapter 4. The Lord is passing through Samaria, an area hostile to the Jews. He stops at a well where He confronts a woman of Samaria. He begins to tell the woman what He knew about her – that she had had five husbands and the man she was living with now was not her husband. The woman seeks to change the subject away from herself to the matter of religion. But instead of bringing her closer to this stranger, it was intended to drive them apart. She said, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, but ye say that Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship". She claimed Jacob as her father. But she also recognised that the Jews had no time for her or her religion. "The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans".

The Lord dismisses the religion of the Samaritans out of hand. "Ye worship ye know not what". And He defends the Jewish religion. "Salvation is of the Jews". These words were true at the time when the Lord was speaking, but He goes on to speak of a time now upon them, when men would worship God neither in Mount Gerizim or Mount Zion. So where then would they worship? It would be "in Spirit and in truth". The new emphasis would be about how men worshipped and not where. That is still true today. Our place of worship is of relatively little importance. John 4 gives the first hint here of what Christian worship is all about. It is spiritual.

AS we compare what we have said about these two chapters, we might well begin to think within ourselves, "Should not these conversations have been reversed? Was it not the immoral woman who needed to hear the command, "Ye must be born again". She above all needed to change her lifestyle. And would not Nicodemus have relished the conversation that took place at the well. Especially as the Lord rejected the religion of the Samaritans and defended that of the Jews.

True, the suggestion that both Gerizim and Zion would soon have no place would disturb him and would have led to further questions. What did He mean by "in Spirit

and in truth”.

But the Lord was absolutely right in His conversation with either. The proud Pharisee, the very epitome of all that was admired in Judaism needed a new start – to be born again. And this new religion of “Sprit and truth” was to be made available to all men and women, including sinners of the Samaritans.

We can sum up so far by saying:

Chapter 3 – What needed to be changed – the heart and life

Chapter 4 – What worship was going to change to

Now in chapter 5, at the pool of Bethesda, we are going to learn a further lesson:

Why things needed to change.

The initial scene is idyllic. We are in the holy city of Jerusalem, the place where God had set His name. We learn that this incident took place at the time of a Jewish feast – we are not told which feast. Perhaps we can assume that it was one of the three occasions in which the Jews were commanded to appear in Jerusalem ie Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. It was a great Jewish occasion. Then there was the pool itself. It was situated near the sheep gat. This was the gate that was rebuilt by the priests during the reconstruction of the city in the days of Nehemiah. The pool itself would normally have been a source of refreshment for men. A place to cool down . And with its five porches, it would give some relief from the burning heat of the day. The pool with its defined border just seems to be a perfect illustration of all that was good about Jerusalem and Judaism.

But soon we learn that all was not as it seemed. The pool was surrounded by a crowd of people and it was a sorry tale. There were all kinds of afflictions - impotent, blind, halt, maimed. Why are they there? At a certain season of the year, an angel came and disturbed the waters of the pool and whoever stepped in was made whole of whatever ailment he was suffering. Angelic ministry was much in evidence when the law was give, “It was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.”

These ailments would remind of some of the failures of sinners today. They are without strength, they have been blinded by the devil, they are walking according to the course of this world. Could the pool help? The pool is a picture of Judaism, of the Law of Moses. It provided some respite from men but was very limited. Under law, God did act from time to time in grace towards sinners. People like Noah and Ruth and Rahab found grace in the eyes of the Lord. But these were the exceptions. So what are the lessons of the Pool with regards to the law? “What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh”.