

## **The Gospel of John Seven Signs, Seven Statements**

### **Lesson #3**

#### **Sign #2 - Jesus heals the royal official's son**

At the end of chapter 4, Jesus returns to the territory around Cana where he'll work his second sign by curing a Royal official's son simply by his word. Some scholars believe that this is a retelling of the encounter Jesus had with the Roman centurion. Jesus told the official to go home and his son would live. The man believed and on arriving home found his son well and that he had been healed at the hour when Jesus spoke his words. **This sign may be one of the most vital and significant signs to us. The natural life given his son is a sign of eternal life, and it shows us that although Jesus is not physically present with us he is able to be spiritually with us. This revelation is meant to show that Jesus' mission is to all people.**

When Christ returns to Galilee and meets the man whose son is dying, He remarks, "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe." (Verse 48) It seems to suggest that Galileans as a people struggle with faith, but more likely it encompasses the idea that humanity as a whole struggles with the concept.

Jesus ministry thus far seems to have been the biggest benefit to the lower classes - to people who seem to have the biggest need. His previous miracle had been visible to minimal people - particularly the servants at the wedding in Cana. Even his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well had been out of contextual norm due to His association with those viewed with a lesser tolerance. However, knowledge about His identity spreads already, as pointed out by verse 45, which says, "They had seen all that He had done in Jerusalem." Jesus' ministry turns now to others who have faith, such as the royal official in this section. Despite Jesus' claim that the people will not believe "unless (they) see miraculous signs" (v 48), the royal official shows faith in Jesus simply by "begging him to come and heal his son" (v 47). The idea that a man would request Jesus to do something shows signs of faith that something good will come of His actions.

You may have noticed that John gives many geographic references in his Gospel. Geography plays a symbolic role in John's Gospel. The northern regions of the Galilee and Samaria accept Jesus in faith but the southern region of Judea and Jerusalem become increasingly antagonistic toward Him as His ministry continues. It is because of this that John will classify the enemies of Christ as "the Jews", those of Judea who are the unbelieving leaders of Judea and Jerusalem.

The saying John quotes Jesus as repeating about prophets is also mentioned in Luke's Gospel when Jesus is rejected by his hometown of Nazareth in Matthew 13:57 and Luke 4:24. But John is probably not referring to His rejection in Nazareth but is commenting

on the irony that although Jesus is a Jew (from the tribe and nation of Judah) He is rejected by kinsmen from his own country of Judea but welcomed in the Galilee.

**In another allusion to days we find that once again it is the third day!** This 3rd day reconnects us to the first sign at Cana when the water was turned into wine. Is it a coincidence that both Cana miracles take place on the third day? What are the similarities between this incident in chapter 4 and what happened in chapter 2

- Both Mary (chapter 2) and the royal official (chapter 4) are petitioners
- Both have faith that Jesus can fulfill their request.
- In this passage John reminds us of the miracle of the “best wine” at Cana. This wine announces the “hour” of Jesus’ glorification and manifests the fulfillment of the wedding feast in the Father’s kingdom where we will drink the new wine that has become the Blood of Christ. (see CCC# 1333-1335)

The village of Capernaum was more than 15 miles from Cana. In the Synoptic Gospels this village is the center of the activity of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, and Matthew tells us that Jesus established His own home there in Peter’s house. Now this is a neat prefiguration. Do you see any symbolism in the fact that Jesus made Peter’s house His headquarters, the center of His ministry? Is Peter’s house still His headquarters? Jesus founded a “house” for Peter and He still resides in that “house” which is the universal, Catholic Church. Peter’s house is the Vatican in Rome. The high altar is built over Peter’s tomb.

The official from the town may be a Roman officer assigned by the Romans to serve Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great and the ruler of Galilee. If this is the same royal official of Matthew 8:5 and Luke 7:2 he built the Jewish Synagogue at Capernaum. In those passages he is identified as a Roman centurion. That he makes no mention of Jesus being the Messiah or the prophet like the woman of Samaria or a man from God like Nicodemus may be an indication that this man is a gentile. The concept of messiah of the promised prophet would not be in the pagan Gentile tradition.

What did it take for this official to seek out Jesus? If this story happened today the newspaper headlines would probably say: "High ranking official leaves capital in search of miracle cure from small town carpenter." It took some guts for a Gentile court official to travel twenty miles in search of a Galilean carpenter. He had to swallow his pride and put up with some ridicule from his cronies. And when he found the healer carpenter, Jesus seemed to put him off with the blunt statement that people would not believe unless they saw some kind of miracle or sign from heaven. Jesus likely said this to test the man to see if his faith was in earnest. If he turned away discouraged or irritated, he would prove to be insincere. Jesus, perceiving his faith, sent him home with the assurance that his prayer had been heard. It was probably not easy for this man to leave Jesus and go back home only with the assuring word that his son would be healed. Couldn't Jesus have come to this man's home and touched his dying child? The court official believed and surrendered to Jesus. He was ready to return home and face mockery and laughter

because he trusted in Jesus' word. God's mercy connotes his generous love -- a love that bends down in response to our misery and wretchedness.

What a challenge! To believe without visible proof; to believe by faith! Actually He is probably also addressing the people of Galilee who have come to see Him perform the miracles they heard He had performed in Cana and Jerusalem. They seem to be more inclined to watch him perform miracles than to listen to His teaching. Jesus is asking the people and the royal official to make a commitment of faith, which can be supported by the miracles that can bolster their faith.

Does Jesus give us the same challenge?

While the accounts in Matthew and Luke are the same, it is difficult to say if John's Gospel offers the same event. In any case, each of these men exhibited remarkable faith and their faith was rewarded.

- St. John Chrysostom's comments about the father in John's account can apply to the Roman centurion as well. St. John wrote: "Here was a robust faith; therefore, Jesus made him the promise, so that we might learn from this man's devotion; his faith was as yet imperfect, and he did not clearly realize that Jesus could effect the cure at a distance; thus, the Lord, by not agreeing to go down to the man's house, wished us to learn the need to have faith." [Homilies on the Gospel of St. John, 35].
- "The seventh hour" This number is probably symbolic, 7 being the number of fullness and perfection especially spiritual perfection. If it is also a literal number it would be 7AM or 7PM Roman time or 1PM Jewish time. The significance of the 7th hour is that it connects this event with the 3rd "sign" in chapter 5. (see handout on time)
- If the royal official is the Gentile centurion as St. Irenaeus and other Church Fathers believed, and as modern scholars like Fr. Raymond Brown and Dr. Scott Hahn believe, there is an interesting connection. Looking back over these three encounters beginning with Nicodemus in Jerusalem capital of Judea, and then with the woman in Samaria, and finally with the Gentile royal official in the Galilee can you see a foreshadowing of the spread of the Gospel? Hint: see Acts 1:8.

At the ascension Jesus commands the Apostles and disciples to carry the Gospel message first to Jerusalem and Judea, next to Samaria, and finally to the Gentile nations of the world. In these three encounters Jesus has taken His message to a Jew of Jerusalem in Judea, to a woman of Samaria and (if the royal official is the Roman centurion) to a Gentile who represents the nations of the world.

- Finally, despite the numerous "signs" we are told that Jesus performed in Jerusalem (see 2:23), John singles this out as the second of the 7 public "signs"

Jesus will perform in John's Gospel. As with all the "signs" John will identify, it points beyond this supernatural event to a future revelation of God.

The first sign of the "best wine" points to the blood that will flow from the side of Christ at the crucifixion, the abundant flow of God's grace and the most holy Eucharist to the world. This second sign points to Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

### **Sign #3- Jesus heals the paralytic man**

Jesus' third sign occurs in Jerusalem, probably during the Feast of Tabernacles. The reason I lean in favor of that particular pilgrim feast is because John's Gospel seems to count the years of Jesus' ministry by the feast of Passover/Unleavened Bread, at the beginning of the liturgical year in March / April, and the Feast of Tabernacles, at the end of each liturgical year in September / October. The next chapter identifies the feast following this unnamed feast as the Passover [John 6:4], the feast that follows Tabernacles in the liturgical calendar.

One always travels "up" to Jerusalem since the holy city is located in the mountains approximately 2,600 feet above sea level. John does not give us any information to help us identify this feast, but, the Feast of Tabernacles lasted 8 days and therefore a Sabbath was always part of that celebration. You should note that today the Jews have erased in their tradition the connection that existed between Jesus' resurrection on the Sunday of the Feast of Firstfruits (see Colossians 1:15-20) and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Sunday, the Feast of Pentecost! The 1<sup>st</sup> century AD historian Flavius Josephus notes this change in the Jewish calendar of feast: *And truly he did not speak falsely in saying so; for the festival, which we call Pentecost, did then fall out to be the next day to the Sabbath...* (*The Antiquities of the Jews, Book 13.8.4 (252)*).

The sign of the healing waters of the pool of Bethesda is also a clue that links this event in chapter 5 to the Feast of Tabernacles. The Feast of Tabernacles is a feast of "Light" and "Water." It is a feast of "Light" as a sign reminiscent of the descent of the *Shekinah* glory [the presence of God] in Solomon's day and looked forward to the return of the *Shekinah* in the days of the Messiah and "Water" as a sign of the Spirit and of God's grace.

In chapters 3-4 we had the themes of "new birth" and healing of the soul through "water and the spirit." Now John leads us to the "healing waters" of the famous pools of Bethesda. This pool, located on the outskirts of Jerusalem, was also called the "Probatric Pool" because it was beside the Probatric Gate also called the Sheep gate (see Nehemiah 3:1-32 and 12:39). It was only through this gate that the animals, which were approved for the sacrifices in the Temple, entered the city. This pool was destroyed when the Roman Army leveled the city in 70AD,

but John's detailed description of the pool was dramatically corroborated by archaeologists in the 1890's when the pool was rediscovered in Jerusalem. Excavated out of rock, the pool was discovered to have a large rectangle surrounded by four galleries with a fifth dividing the rectangle into two pools. It has 5 porticos just as John described it in his Gospel. Identification of the name of the pool was later made possible by the reference in the Copper Scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls [column 11, line 12] to Bet esdatain (in the plural probably because there were 2 basins). Before the discovery of the Copper Scroll it was thought Bethesda meant "place or house of mercy" but the reference to this pool in the Copper Scroll seems to indicate the meaning is "place of flowing." [Note: some sources report that Bethesda was used as a pagan healing pool until the second destruction of Jerusalem in 135AD but these sources are confusing Bethesda with the pool of Siloam, see Isaiah 8:6, John 9:7 & 11, also associated with healing powers].

It is interesting that John clearly states that there "is a pool called Bethesda" using the present tense. Scholars who support the dating of this Gospel prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD use this verse as evidence of this earlier dating since the pools no longer existed after that date. If he was writing after the destruction of Jerusalem, which was the end of the world for the Old Covenant, these scholars argue John would have noted that this pool used to be there before the destruction, but instead he clearly uses the present tense telling us the pools still exist at the time of the writing of his Gospel

Some ancient hand written manuscripts add the following to John's Gospel; *..crowds of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the water to move; for at intervals the angel of the Lord came down into the pool, and the water was disturbed, and the first person to enter the water after this disturbance was cured of any ailment from which he was suffering.* This passage is assigned as a footnote in most Bible translations because it does not appear in the most important Greek codices [unbound pages, the precursor to our modern books] and papyri scrolls, nor does it appear in many ancient translations but St. Jerome who translated from the oldest Greek and Hebrew texts he could find in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, included this passage in his Vulgate Latin translation and St. John Chrysostom also included this passage. St. John Chrysostom wrote *An angel came down and troubled the water, and endued it with a healing power, that the Jews might learn that much more could the Lord of Angels heal the diseases of the soul. Yet as here it was not simply the nature of the water that healed, (for then this would have always taken place,) but water joined to the operation of the Angel; so in our case, it is not merely the water that works, but when it has received the grace of the Spirit, then it puts away all our sins.*

St. John Chrysostom taught that the pool of Bethesda was a symbol of the promise of Christian Baptism, but like so many Old Covenant symbols and institutions it was incomplete. This ancient healing pool only cured physical ailments and only cured one person now and then. But Baptism, St. John assures

us, heals the soul and is available to everyone who comes to Christ in faith. However, St. John reminds us, in both cases, in Baptism and at the pool of Bethesda, God's power is shown through the natural element of water! [*Homilies on St. John, 36, 1*].

In this sign we are immediately struck by an odd description of the length of time the man suffered. John tells us that the man had been ill 38 years? What significance does this number of years have in the history of Israel?

In Numbers, chapter 13, at a place called Kadesh Barnea, Yahweh commands Moses to send out men, one from each tribe, to reconnoiter the land of Canaan in preparation for the Israelite invasion. When they returned 40 days later only Joshua [Hosea] of the tribe of Ephraim and Caleb of the tribe of Judah believed they could conquer the land; the others had no faith that God would help them conquer the land. The people of Israel, accepting the discouraging report of the 10, cried out against Yahweh and threatened to depose Moses and Aaron in order to return to Egypt. As punishment for their lack of faith and their open rebellion Yahweh condemned Israel to wander forty years, one year for each day the 12 men had reconnoitered the land, until every man of that generation had died except Joshua and Caleb. When they came to the boundary of the country of Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan River 38 years had passed and all the men of the first generation had died except Joshua and Caleb.

The man by the Bethesda pool suffered 38 years due to some unspecified sin (see verse 14), and becomes a comparison to the suffering of the Children of Israel for 38 years in the wilderness because of their sin. In both cases, in spite of their sins, God did not abandon them. After the time of their penitence, God gave the children of Israel Joshua [Yehoshua = Jesus] to lead them into the Promised Land. Jesus, the new Joshua, will heal the man who is a symbol of the paralyzed nation, and He will heal Israel and lead the Old Covenant Church to a new beginning if she will not be rebellious as she was before when God was prepared to lead her into the Promised Land. This is Jesus' 3<sup>rd</sup> "sign."

In his notes that accompany the *St. Ignatius Bible study of John's Gospel* Dr. Scott Hahn reminds the Bible student that the supernatural meaning underneath the natural meaning is the greater meaning. He also comments that the deception of the 10 spies of imperfect faith who led Israel into rebellion against God and refused the gift of the Promised Land would have resonated with 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians. They saw the 10 unbelieving spies who deceived the people as symbolic of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews who rejected Christ as the Messiah and who were deceiving the Old Covenant Church and leading them into rebellion against Christ and the New Covenant Church.

Jesus asks the man, who is so obviously suffering, if he **wants** to be healed? Jesus connects the man's suffering to sin, the man must sincerely want to be healed, just as all of us must sincerely want to be healed and make a sincere act

of contrition in our desire to be healed of sin through the sacrament of Reconciliation.

We are told by John that this third sign occurs on the Sabbath. This is the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week, and this number links us to the first and second signs. The royal official's son was healed at the 7<sup>th</sup> hour and the sign at Cana was also the 7<sup>th</sup> day. 7 is the number symbolic of spiritual perfection. The healing of the royal official's son shows Jesus' power over suffering and death and that He is transforming believers into a New Creation. Now this healing on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of a Jew suffering from sin that the Old Covenant cannot remove (there was no forgiveness for mortal sin, only for unintentional sin see Numbers 15:27-31) signifies that the imperfect Old Covenant will be transformed into a New Covenant where Jesus, in His perfection, will offer complete healing and restoration.

The man had no idea who Jesus was, since Jesus had disappeared. St Cyril of Jerusalem in his homily on "The Healing of the Paralytic" taught that Jesus withdrew into the crowd, shunning praise, to teach us to serve God out of love and not to seek worldly recognition. When we receive earthly acknowledgement for a good work we have already received our reward that could have been given to us in heaven. *"Be careful not to parade your uprightness in public to attract attention; otherwise you will lose all reward from your Father in heaven"* [St Cyril's homily on the Paralytic, 16].

The Jews (Pharisees) were disturbed that Jesus told the man to rise and walk with his sleeping-mat. According to the Law of the Sinai Covenant no work was to be done on the Sabbath. Jewish theologians taught that God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of creation [Genesis 2:1-3], therefore they observed Sabbath as the human counterpart of this divine "rest." (see Exodus 31:12-14 and Jeremiah 17:21-22:)

So we ask ourselves: Is Jesus rejecting the Old Covenant Sabbath? If not, why does He seem to be in violation of the Law?

He is not in violation of the Law. Jesus is demonstrating the real meaning of the Sabbath. It is His teaching that we are expected to refrain from the material and from sinful works on the Sabbath. The Jewish priests still performed their duties on the Sabbath. People are still born and die on the Sabbath. Since only God has the power over life and death it follows, therefore, that God still "works" on the Sabbath. The concept of entering into "God's rest" is our communion with the Father on the Sabbath in which we lay aside our labor and worship God because that is the way we express our faith that He will supply us with our needs. But the real significance of the Sabbath is for God to manifest Himself in our lives and for us to reflect His love by doing acts of mercy in the lives of others, even when we see that need on the new Covenant Sabbath, the Lord's Day.

Jesus meets up with the man and seems to be warning him. What was the “something worse” than suffering for 38 years? Jesus is warning him to sin again. To neglect the relationship with God is to risk something worse than his disease. The risk is his immortal soul.

In the case of this individual his sin was linked to his suffering. Old Covenant believers thought every physical ailment was the result of some sin committed by the individual or by his parents [see Psalms 107:17 and John 9:1-3]. Jesus clearly taught that this was not always the case as in His response to His disciples in John 9:3 shows: “*Rabbi who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should have been born blind?*” “*Neither he nor his parents sinned,’ Jesus answered, ‘he was born blind so that the works of God might be revealed in him.’*” Jesus warns the man he healed at Bethesda that his cure is a gift from God that must be accompanied by a conversion of heart [Matthew 9:2-8]. This 3<sup>rd</sup> sign is, therefore, a sign of the spiritual resurrection promised in the New Covenant.

What statement does Jesus make in verse 17 that enrages the Jews to the point that they conspire to kill Him?

Putting his answer in human terms his audience can understand, Jesus compares Himself to a son who imitates his father to learn his father’s trade skills. Jesus is the apprentice of Yahweh, learning by observation and imitation the skills of the Father and by obedience to all He hears from the Father (5:19-21).

In Matthew chapter 12 Jesus addresses this same issue of the Sabbath restrictions where he reminds those who condemn Him for breaking the Sabbath of the story in 1 Samuel where David and his men, when being pursued by Saul, were allowed to eat the Bread of the Presence in the Tabernacle and then added ...*have you not read in the Law how the priests in the Temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless...* Jesus’ point is that those who have been anointed by God are not bound by the Sabbath restrictions because they are fulfilling the will of God.

By calling God His Father Jesus is claiming the status of divine son-ship for Himself. He is declaring Himself equal with God for although the Son is less than the Father in His humanity (John 14:28) He is equal to God the Father in His divinity (John 10:33).