

*LESSON #9 CHAPTER 5:1-47*  
***The Man Who Was Equal with God***

Divine Attribute: Life-Giving

Theological concept: Jesus is God

Geographical location: Jerusalem

Chapter Structure

- 5:1-9 An Open Sign at Bethesda – Jesus Healed an Invalid
- 5:10-18 A Controversial on Sabbath – They began to persecute Jesus
- 5:19-29 The Three Claims – Jesus’s divine identity
- 5:30-47 The Three Witnesses – Jesus’s Credentials

Spiritual Principles:

- P1 God desires us to worship Jesus Christ as God**
- P2 No amount of good work can make us righteous**
- P3 Sound theology will lead to doxology**
- P4 Read the Bible attentively with the love of God**

**Today’s lesson...**

Our Lord has kept the first two miracles he performed privately. Only the servants and the disciples knew that Jesus had the water transformed into wine, and only the servants and the nobleman’s family knew that Jesus had sealed the sick son. The miracle we are looking at in Chapter 5 was not only public but it was also performed on the Sabbath day. The miracle illustrated the power of Jesus' word and the gift of life. This infuriated the religious establishment, and we see the start of 'official persecution' against our Lord.

**A. 5:1-9 An Open Sign at Bethesda – Jesus Healed an Invalid**

*1After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. 3In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed, 4wholly or in part, waiting for the moving of the water; 5for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had. 6One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years.*

The central chapters of the Gospel of John are chronologically related to various festivals of the Jewish year: John 2:13 Passover, 5:1 unknown, 6:4 Passover, 7:2 Tabernacles, 10:22 Dedication, and 11:55 Passover. The festival mentioned here cannot be determined.

When you visit St. Anne’s Church in Jerusalem today, they will show you the deep excavation that has revealed the ancient Pool of Bethesda. It is located near the northeast corner of Old Jerusalem, close to the Sheep Gate (Neh 3:1).

Even though this man did not know Jesus, Jesus knew that he had been paralysed for 38 years (5:6). He had been in a certain kind of sin (5:14 suggests that the man's physical plight had been the result of sin), as 2:24 said: "*he knew all people*". Jesus singled him out from the multitude of sick people – the blind, lame and paralysed – for him to receive His healing grace and to be the first public witness to the power of his word! Dear brothers and sisters, we are sure this man was not the 'best' of all the people that needed help there. God acts in a way that we do not understand. It is by divine sovereignty that this man was chosen, just as we are chosen before the creation to be saved in Christ (Eph 1:4) *solely* by divine sovereignty and not by our deeds.

*6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?"*

Jesus' question for the man, "*Do you want to be healed?*" in verse 6, may seem strange, but it was no doubt purposeful. Did the man want to be cured? After being in that condition for many years, the man might be reluctant to face the new challenge of living an independent life. It is quite true for us also. We know that following the teachings of the Bible can lead to a more fulfilling life in Christ. Yet, we might be reluctant to forego some of the pleasures we enjoy very much, put in more effort to do what is right, or change our lifestyle, failing to receive Christ's promise of a victorious and abundant life.

*7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me."* The man's reply to Jesus indicated that it was a lack of opportunity and not a will.

Jesus had spiritual lessons in mind for the paralytic and us when he performed this miracle. The question "*Do you want to be healed?*" is twofold, "*Do you want to be healed wholly as a person, both physically and spiritually?*" this can be seen from what Jesus said to him subsequently in verse 14 "*Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you."* Many people are more concerned about being healed physically but not spiritually. But God intends to heal us wholly. If you are struggling with a sinful habit, go to the crimson fountain of Jesus, lift your eyes, look at the Lord hanging on the cross, and hear him ask you, "Do you want to be healed?"

Before God intervenes and redeems a person, he or she must despise sin and desire to be free. When a person is still indulging in the pleasures of sin, his or her heart will be closed toward Jesus. The path into the heart has to be made straight before the Lord Jesus may enter. That is what John the Baptist did so that the hearts of sinners may embrace the Cross and the crimson fountain. This is also what the church does today as the ambassadors of Christ.

*8 Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk."* In Jesus' command, there was the power of healing *9 And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.* The cure was immediate. Jesus healed him through the power of His spoken word. God has revealed that only His words have such power,

*"so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."* (Isa 55:11)

Jesus is no other than God himself.

<b>Reflection:</b> How am I worshipping Jesus as my God?
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After this, Jesus did not continue to heal others. Instead, he withdrew from the crowd (5:13), probably to avoid a commotion because some of the many people at the pool must have witnessed it.

The miracle would have caused no trouble if it had been done on any day other than the Sabbath. But Jesus purposely did it on Sabbath, just as he did several other Sabbaths. His purpose was to teach them the truth of the Sabbath and the right way of Sabbath-keeping. (Yes, the Lord would sometimes purposely cause trouble for us to teach us timely lessons.)

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### B. 5:10-19 A Controversial on Sabbath – They began to persecute Jesus

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*10 So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” 11 But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’”*

In the records of all of the four gospel books, it is Jesus’ infringement of the traditional interpretation of the sabbath law that *first* brings him into serious conflict with the religious authorities (Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-3:6, Luke 6:1-11, John 5:10-17). In particular, His sovereign attitude to the sabbath aroused the deadly hostility of his opponents.

The scribes had listed 39 categories of work that were prohibited on the Sabbath, which is known as the ‘tradition of the elders’; and the 39<sup>th</sup> of these was carrying a load from one dwelling place to another. By this standard, the man carrying his mat home violated the Sabbath law. (The ‘*bed*’ was a mat or a pallet of straw, easily rolled up and carried on the shoulder (also in Mark 2:9)). When Jesus instructed the man to “*Get up, take up your bed, and walk*”, it was a deliberate challenge to the legalistic traditions.

The Sabbath, in Jesus’ eyes, was provided to be a divine blessing rather than a burden to humanity. Sabbath-keeping is not to relax but to have peace and order. So, the Sabbath is most worthily kept when its purpose is most actively advocated. Jesus saw acts of healing and relief not as *acceptable exceptions* to the Sabbath restriction but as works that should be done primarily on that day because they so clearly corresponded to the divine purpose in its institution. But the Jewish leaders had taken God’s gift to humanity and had transformed it into a prison house of regulations.

*15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. 16 And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.*

The Jewish leaders did not prosecute the paralytic, even though he had broken the sabbath law, but they began prosecuting the Lord Jesus. Firstly, inciting others to break the law was worse than breaking it oneself. Secondly, as the guardians of the faith, the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, i.e., the religious ruling council, had the responsibility of investigating new preachers and teachers who appeared in the land, lest some false prophet come along and lead the people astray. They had looked into the ministry of John the Baptist (1:19) and had now begun to do so with Jesus. So, they confronted Jesus.

*17 “My Father is working until now, and I am working. 18 This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*

To understand the point Jesus was making here, let us look at Hebrew 4:3-5

*“Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, “So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ and yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. 4 For*

*somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works." 5 And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."*

There is a Sabbath-rest for God's people. The Sabbath-rest is God's rest, where God rested from the work of creation on the seventh day. God's rest was made available to man when He finished the creation work, which has never ended. God promised that we could come into His rest through faith in Christ. Jesus' point is: Ever since the fall of humanity, God has been and still is working for the salvation of humanity, seeking lost sinners and saving them. So, he said, "If my Father works on the Sabbath, so must I, the Son."

In their synagogue sessions of prayer and thankfulness, the Jews were accustomed to addressing God as "our Father." It indicates that Jews as a people are God's sons. By addressing God as "my Father" rather than "our Father," Jesus claimed sonship to God for himself as a person, putting himself on the same level as God because the son of a man is a man, and the son of God is God. For the Jews, it was unthinkable that anyone should be comparable to God! (Isa 40:25 To whom will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.) It was a fatal desire to be like God that had driven Adam from paradise and caused Satan, son of Dawn the Day Star, to fall from heaven. Now, Jesus' words and actions implied a trespass across the inviolable boundary that separated God from mankind. Such a man, to the Jewish leaders, constituted a danger to the community and should not be allowed to live. They decided to find ways to convict Jesus of blasphemy, which was a capital charge.

### **Life Application**

God's Sabbath-rest is available to all who believe in Jesus; it is not limited to Sunday or a particular day. We can enter and enjoy that rest regardless of outward circumstances. This is the peace, joy, and contentment that transcends all understanding that Paul experienced; we can find them in the letter he wrote to the Philippian church, particularly in verses 4:1,7,12.

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## **C. 5:19-47 The Three Claims – Jesus' divine identity**

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Jesus made three claims to illustrate that he is equal with God in honour, power to raise the dead, and authority to pardon and judge sin. He closed his claims by revealing who His witnesses are. In these claims, Jesus did not shy away from the sore spot of his opponents. He asserted his right to address God as "my Father" by referring to himself as "the Son" directly!

### **Claim #1: He is equal with God in divine honour** vv.5:19-23

*19 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. 21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. 22 For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, 23 that all may honour the Son, just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him.*

The Son of God Incarnate came into the world with a humble background: "*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him*" (Isa 53:2). In a world that judges people based on their outward appearance, he was honoured neither by his Nazareth townfolks nor the religious leaders (lesson #5). Though the Son is equal with the Father and has obtained the Father's love, he maintained an attitude of a son - perfect

submission to the Father. It is always for the Father to initiate, and it is for the Son to obey. It is for the Father to plan, and it is for the Son to execute. In fact, in the Father's plan, there are greater works that would cause the opponents of the Son to marvel. Here, Jesus was talking about the eschatological physical resurrection and the ultimate judgment. Though the Son veiled His glory and laid aside His divine power, the Father honours Him by granting him the power and authority to raise the dead and to judge the world. Philippians 2:5-8 is an echo of this passage. As the author of Hebrews said, "*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (Heb 1:3) It is the Father's will for all creatures to honour the Son as God. Jesus is not a 'sub-God. He is God, "*I and my Father are one*" (10:30).

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### God desires us to worship Jesus Christ as God

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Jesus warned his opponents that if they do not honour him, they are dishonouring God!

#### ***Life Application:***

Sometimes, we may perceive Jesus as our Saviour and God as our God. Jesus, who bled from the crown of thorns and the three nails on the cross and died in our place, is now enthroned in heaven, hailed and worshipped by all creatures. We are to worship Him as Lord and God, no less.

Let us be mindful not to hold a judgmental attitude towards people, especially towards Christ's beloved church, as the Jewish leader did with God's beloved Son. The Lord Jesus reminded us that there is always a plank in our eyes that blocks our vision and clouds our judgment. (Mt 7:1-3)

#### **Claim #2: He is equal with God in power to raise the dead** vv.5:24-26

*24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. 25 "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.*

In Jewish belief, God alone has the power and prerogatives to raise the dead. This is demonstrated by the following extract of the great synagogue prayer called the Amidah or 'Eighteen benedictions':

*'Who is like thee, O Lord of mighty acts? Who is comparable to thee, O King, who bringest to death and quickenest again, and causest salvation to spring forth? Yea, thou art faithful to quicken the dead. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickenest the dead!'*

What does the Bible say about this? Verse 26 tells us that the Father raises the dead and gives them life because *He has life in himself*. None but God the Father, unbegotten and uncreated, inherently possess life-in-himself. God is life. None of the created living things possess life-in-themselves. Their life is derived from God, the source and sustenance of all life.

And to the begotten Son alone has the Father imparted his prerogative to have life-in-himself. It did not start with the Incarnation. It is an eternal act that already existed in the arché's beginning. It is an eternal order.

That was why Jesus could resurrect the dead by commanding them, “*Lazarus, come out!*” (Jn 11:43) or the son of the widow at Nain “*Young man, I say to you, arise!*” (Luke 7:14) or the daughter of Jairus “*Daughter, I say to you, arise!*” (Mark 5:41) Life was restored through the words that come out from his mouth because there is authority in Jesus’ words, just as in God’s words! Elijah and Elisha, on the other hand, had to pray to God to restore life to the dead because they did not have the life-in-themselves. It was God granting their prayers.

So those people to whom the Son chose to give life are those who hear his life-giving word and believe him. Verse 24 tells us that they have ‘*passed out of death into life*’ (5:24). People do not have to wait until the end of time to hear the divine acquittal judgment or to experience the essence of resurrection. They are spiritually alive and are living eternal life here and now! <sup>1</sup>

But there is a question: how could a dead man hear the voice of the Lord? Verse 25 recalls the vision of the valley of dry bones in the book of Ezekiel. “*O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.*” (Eze 37:4). It was the breath of God entering into the bones that enabled the bones to come alive. The same Spirit of God now enables the spiritually dead to hear the voice of the Son and come alive and enter eternity! “*an hour is coming, and is now here*”, this is now happening.

**Claim #3: He is equal with God in authority to judge all men** vv.5:27-30

*27 And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.*

In verse 27, the authority to execute judgment is given to the Son because he is the Son of man. This is a definite messianic title from Daniel’s vision of the final judgment (Dan 7:10,13,26f.) So what the Jews heard Jesus say in verse 27 was, “*I am the Messiah and Judge.*”

“*for an hour is coming*” in verse 28 refers to the last day Jesus will make the ultimate judgment on all people. This once-for-all resurrection and separation is paralleled in Revelations 20:11-14. The resurrection is not spiritual but physical. “I believe in the resurrection of the body” is in the declaration of our faith in the Apostles’ Creed.

We are not to read verse 29 out of context and conclude eternal life is granted based on good work, for God has already revealed that ‘*Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.*’ (Ps 143:2). This verse should be read in the context of chapter 3, with particular reference to 3:19-21. Then we will see clearly that “*those who have done good*” in v.29 are those who have put their trust in Jesus because those who do what according to the truth would come to the light (3:21); “*those who have done evil*” in verse 29 are those who hate the Light and does not come to the Light, who is Jesus (3:20).

The thought of the bodily resurrection is exciting and marvellous for those who belong to Christ, for we will receive everlasting life in a glorious body (1Cor 15:35-57). On the other hand, it will be horrifying for those who resurrect with a living body only to experience the second death of everlasting torment in the lake of fire (Rev 20:15). Let us make it a habit to think about the eschatology, so that we may hold on to our

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<sup>1</sup> This anticipation of a “acquittal” verdict and resurrection life sums up what in the theological term “realized eschatology”.

faith and not drift away by the torrent of sin. The final separation and the verdict of judgment will be the ratification of a decision made in this life – to come to the Light, put our trust in Jesus and have our sins forgiven, or to reject the Light, continue to toil vainly in becoming righteous through good work.

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**P2 No amount of good work can make us righteous**

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**D. 5:30–47 The Three Witnesses – Jesus’s Credentials**

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Jesus has made three claims to illustrate that He is equal with God. But no one can witness his own signature (v.31). The Old Testament law similarly requires the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deut 17:6). So Jesus gave three trustworthy witnesses: John the Baptist, the miracles he performed, and the word of God.

**Witness #1: John the Baptist vv.33-35**

*33 You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. 34 Not that the testimony that I receive is from man, but I say these things so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.*

In 1:29-34, John the Baptist testified that Jesus was the Coming One and the Son of God. John shed light on who Jesus is. But now the witness was removed. Even so, Jesus has a greater testimony – God the Father.

**Witness #2: Miraculous works performed by Jesus vv.36**

*36 But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.*

Remember, in this Gospel book, miracles are called signs. They reveal Jesus' true identity, that he was the One God has promised and has now sent.

**Witness #3: The word of God vv.37-47**

*37 And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. 39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*

God has borne testimony for Jesus at his baptism, with an audible voice from heaven and the visible form of a dove, “*this is my Son, whom I love*” (Mat 3:17). But the Jewish leaders' rejection of Jesus caused them to reject God's testimony as well as the testimony of the written word of God, mainly the law that was given through Moses. They study the law to find out how not to break it so that they may have eternal life. Without the love of God in their heart, they counted the very letter of the law but missed the heart of God that the law reveals (Luke 11:42), and thus the way they fulfilled the law did not lead them to eternal life. If they had truly sought the heart of God in the law, they would have recognised from Jesus' perfect morality, perfect teaching, and power to perform miracles that He is truly the prophet Moses mentioned and the Holy One sent by God. They could not claim ignorance of the law's witness; if they did, Moses would be the one to accuse them.

Their lack of love for God (5:42) is the leading cause of their rejection of Jesus. As Jesus pointed out in vv. 41-47, they loved honour from men, not from God. They hated Jesus because they could not get from

him the honour and respect they constantly sought (Luke 11:43). By rejecting Jesus, they rejected God and life.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is very easy for Christians to fall prey to false piety under the name of theological fervour, as did the Pharisees and experts of the law in Jesus' time. The knowledge of God should give us a humble, godly, and fervent heart, not a swollen head. As Prof J. I. Packer said, "Sound theology will naturally lead to doxology." You can't stop praising God!

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**P3 Sound theology will lead to doxology**

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**E. Closing**

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Three times in this chapter, the Lord Jesus introduced His words with these solemn words: "*Truly, truly, I say to you,*" (5:19, 24, 25). We will find Jesus saying it more than twenty times in this Gospel book. He is effectively saying, "Pay attention to this! What I am about to say is important." Before the Lord closed the last chapter of His revelations for us, he repeatedly called out to His churches seven times, "*Whoever has ears, let them hear*".

***The Bible is not so much what God has said but what God is saying to the one who opens it.*** Dear brothers and sisters, God did not give us the bible and leave it to us to decide whether to read it. God calls us to read it attentively! Let us pay attention to the scripture with the love of God whenever we read it. If we do that, we can hear what God is saying to us.

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**P4 Read the Bible attentively with the love of God**

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