EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And many Explanatory Notes.

BY THE REV. J. C. RYLE, B. A.,

CHRIST CHURCH, OXFORD,
VICAR OF STRADBROKE, SUFFOLK;
Author of "Home Truths," etc.

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1 After this there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
2 Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches.
3 In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.
4 For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water; whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.
5 And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.
6 When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?
7 The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming another steppeth down before me.
8 Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.
9 And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath.
10 The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured. It is the sabbath day: it is not lawful for thee to carry thy bed.
11 He answered them, He that made me whole the same said unto me, Take up thy bed, and walk.
12 Then asked they him, What man is that which said unto thee, Take up thy bed, and walk?
13 And he that was healed wist not who it was: for Jesus had conveyed himself away, a multitude being in that place.
14 Afterward Jesus findeth him in the temple, and said unto him, Behold, thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.
15 The man departed, and told the Jews that it was Jesus, which had made him whole.

WE have in this passage one of the few miracles of Christ which St. John records. Like every other miracle in this Gospel, it is described with great minuteness and particularity. And like more than one other miracle it leads on to a discourse full of singularly deep instruction.

We are taught, for one thing, in this passage, what misery sin has brought into the world. We read of a man who had been ill for no less than thirty-eight years! For eight-and-thirty weary summers and winters he had endured pain and infirmity. He had seen others healed at the waters of Bethesda, and going to their homes rejoicing. But for him there had been no healing. Friendless, helpless, and hopeless, he lay near the wonder-working waters, but derived no benefit from them. Year after year passed away, and left him still uncured. No relief or change for the better seemed likely to come, except from the grave.

When we read of cases of sickness like this, we should remember how deeply we ought to hate sin! Sin was the original root, and cause, and fountain of every disease in the world. God did not create man to be full of aches, and pains, and infirmities. These things are the fruits of the Fall. There would have been no sickness, if there had been no sin.
No greater proof can be shown of man’s inbred unbelief, than his carelessness about sin. “Fools,” says the wise man, “make a mock at sin.” (Prov. xiv. 9.) Thousands delight in things which are positively evil, and run greedily after that which is downright poison. They love that which God abhors, and dislike that which God loves. They are like the madman, who loves his enemies and hates his friends. Their eyes are blinded. Surely if men would only look at hospitals and infirmaries, and think what havoc sin has made on this earth, they would never take pleasure in sin as they do.

Well may we be told to pray for the coming of God’s kingdom! Well may we be told to long for the second advent of Jesus Christ! Then, and not till then, shall there be no more curse on the earth, no more suffering, no more sorrow, and no more sin. Tears shall be wiped from the faces of all who love Christ’s appearing, when their Master returns. Weakness and infirmity shall all pass away. Hope deferred shall no longer make hearts sick. There will be no chronic invalids and incurable cases, when Christ has renewed this earth.

We are taught, for another thing, in this passage, how great is the mercy and compassion of Christ. He “saw” the poor sufferer lying in the crowd. Neglected, overlooked, and forgotten in the great multitude, he was observed by the all-seeing eye of Christ. “He knew” full well, by His Divine knowledge, how long he had been “in that case,” and pitied him. He spoke to him unexpectedly, with words of gracious sympathy. He healed him by miraculous power, at once and without tedious delay, and sent him home rejoicing.

This is just one among many examples of our Lord Jesus Christ’s kindness and compassion. He is full of undeserved, unexpected, abounding love towards man. “He delighteth in mercy.” (Micah vii. 18.) He is far more ready to save than man is to be saved, far more willing to do good than man is to receive it.

No one ever need be afraid of beginning the life of a true Christian, if he feels disposed to begin. Let him not hang back and delay, under the vain idea that Christ is not willing to receive him. Let him come boldly, and trust confidently. He that healed the cripple at Bethesda is still the same.

We are taught, lastly, the lesson that recovery from sickness ought to impress upon us. That lesson is contained in the solemn words which our Saviour addressed to the man He had cured: “Sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.”

Every sickness and sorrow is the voice of God speaking to us. Each has its peculiar message. Happy are they who have an eye to see God’s hand, and an ear to hear His voice, in all that happens to them. Nothing in this world happens by chance.
And as it is with sickness, so it is with recovery. Renewed health should send us back to our post in the world with a deeper hatred of sin, a more thorough watchfulness over our own ways, and a more constant purpose of mind to live to God. Far too often the excitement and novelty of returning health tempt us to forget the vows and intentions of the sick-room. There are spiritual dangers attending a recovery! Well would it be for us all after illness to grave these words on our hearts, “Let me sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto me.”

Let us leave the passage with grateful hearts, and bless God that we have such a Gospel and such a Saviour as the Bible reveals.—Are we ever sick and ill? Let us remember that Christ sees, and knows, and can heal if He thinks fit.—Are we ever in trouble? Let us hear in our trouble the voice of God, and learn to hate sin more.

NOTES. JOHN V. 1-15.

1.—[After this.] Literally translated, this would be, “after these things.” Some think that when St. John is telling some event which follows immediately after the last thing narrated, he uses the expression, “after this thing” (as John ii. 12), but that when there has been an interval of time he uses the expression, “after these things.”—If this be correct, we must suppose that some space of time elapsed between the healing of the nobleman’s son and the visit to Jerusalem, recorded in this chapter.

[A feast of the Jews.] There is nothing to show what feast this was. Most Commentators think it was the passover. Many however think it was the feast of pentecost. Some few say it was the feast of tabernacles, some the feast of purim, and some the feast of the dedication. Each view has its advocates, and the question will probably never be settled. An argument in favour of the passover is the fact that none of the five Jewish feasts were so regularly attended by devout Jews as the passover. An argument against it is the fact that on three other occasions, when the feast of the passover is mentioned in St. John, he carefully specifies it by name; and one would naturally expect that it would be named here.

The matter is really of no peculiar importance. In one point of view only it is interesting.—If the “feast” was the passover, it proves that there were four passovers during the period of our Lord’s ministry on earth. St. John mentions three by name,—beside this “feast.” (John ii. 23; vi. 4; xii. 1.) This would make it certain that our Lord’s ministry lasted three full years, or at any rate must have begun with a passover and ended with a passover.—If the “feast” was not the passover, we have no proof that His ministry lasted longer than between two and three years. (See notes on John ii. 13.)

The expression, “a feast of the Jews,” is one of many incidental evidences that St. John wrote specially for the use of Gentile converts, and that he thought it needful for their benefit to explain Jewish ordinances.

[Jesus went up.] The frequency of our Lord’s attendance at Jewish feasts, and the respect He showed for Mosaic ordinances, should always be noticed. They were appointed by God, and so long as they lasted, He gave them honour. It is an important proof to us that the unworthiness of ministers is no reason, for neglecting God’s ordinances, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The benefit we receive from ordinances and sacraments does not depend on the character of
those who administer them, but on the state of our own souls. The priests and officers of the Temple, in our Lord’s time, were probably very unworthy persons. But that did not prevent our Lord honing the Temple ordinances and feasts.—It does not however follow from this that we should be justified in habitually going to hear false doctrine preached. Our Lord never did this.

Let it be noted, that none of the four Gospel writers speak so much of our Lord’s doings in Judæa and Jerusalem as St. John does.

2.—[There is at Jerusalem.] These words, it is thought, show that Jerusalem was yet standing and not taken and destroyed by the Romans, when John wrote his Gospel. Otherwise, it is argued, he would have said, “There was at Jerusalem.”

[By the sheep-market a pool.] Nothing certain is known about this pool, or its precise situation. Modern travellers have professed to point out where it was. But there is little ground for determining the matter, except conjecture and tradition. After all the changes of eighteen centuries, points like these are almost incapable of a satisfactory solution. There is no place in the world, perhaps, where it is so difficult to settle anything decidedly about ancient buildings and sites as Jerusalem. Some propose to render the expression “sheep-market” the “sheep-gate,” because of Nehemiah iii. 1. But we really have no certain ground for either expression.

[Called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda.] The word “Bethesda,” according to Cruden, mean “house of effusion,” or “house of pity or mercy.” It is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. The mention of the “Hebrew tongue,” shows again that John did not write for Jews so much as Gentiles.

[Having five porches.] These porches were probably covered arcades, piazzas, colonnades, or verandas, open at one side to the air, but protected against the sun or rain over-head. In a hot country like Palestine, such buildings are very necessary.

3.—[In these lay a great multitude.] The context seems to show that the multitude were assembled at this particular feast in this place, expecting a certain miracle to be wrought, which only took place at this particular time of the year.

[Impotent folk.] This expression evidently does not mean paralytic people, but merely people who were sick and ill. The mention of “blind, halt, withered,” shows this.

[Moving of the water.] This “moving” must have been something that could be seen and observed by persons standing by or looking on. There was no virtue or healing element in the water, until the movement took place.

4.—[For an angel went down, etc.] The thing we are here told is very curious. There is nothing like it in the Bible. Josephus, the Jewish writer, does not mention it. The simplest view is that it was a standing miracle wrought once every year, as Cyril says, or at any rate at some special season only, by God’s appointment, to keep the Jews in mind of the wonderful works that had been done for them in time past, and to remind them that the God of miracles was unchanged.—But when this singular miracle first began,—on what occasion it began,—why we never hear anything else about it,—in what way the angel came down,—are questions which cannot be answered. —That angels did interpose in a miraculous manner in the days of the New Testament, is perfectly clear from many instances in the Gospels and Acts. That the Jews themselves had strong faith in the interposition of angels on certain occasions, is clear from the account of the vision of Zacharias, when we are simply told that the people “perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple.” (Luke i. 22.) That from the days of Malachi, when inspiration ceased, God may have seen it good to keep up in the Jewish mind a faith in unseen things, by the grant of a standing miracle, is a very probable opinion. The wisest course is to take the passage as we find it, and to believe though we cannot explain.
All other attempts to get over the difficulties of the passage are thoroughly unsatisfactory. To condemn the passage as not genuine, is a lazy way of cutting the knot, and not at all clearly warranted by the authority of manuscripts. — To say that St. John only used the popular language of the Jews in describing the miracle, and did not really believe it himself, is, to say the least, irreverent and profane. — To suppose, as Hammond and others have done, that the “angel” only means a common human “messenger” sent by the priests, and that the healing efficacy of the water arose from the blood of the many sacrifices which drained into the pool of Bethesda at the passover feast; — or to suppose, as others, that Bethesda was a pool where sacrifices were washed before they were offered, are all entirely gratuitous assumptions, and do not get over the main difficulty. There is no proof that the blood of the sacrifices did drain into the pool. There is no proof that the blood would give the water any healing virtue. There is no proof, as Lightfoot shows, that sacrifices were washed at all. (See Lightfoot’s Exercitations on John, on this passage.) Moreover this hypothesis would not account for only one person being healed every time the waters were “troubled,” or for St. John’s mention of the “angel troubling the waters. Here, as in many other instances, the simplest view, and the one which involves the fewest difficulties, is to take the passage as we find it, and to interpret it as narrating an actual fact: viz., a standing miracle which actually was literally wrought at a certain season, and perhaps every year.

After all there is no more real difficulty in the account before us, than in the history of our Lord’s temptation in the wilderness, the various cases of Satanic possession, or the release of Peter from prison by an angel. Once admit the existence of angels, their ministry on earth, and the possibility of their interposition to carry out God’s designs, and there is nothing that ought to stumble us in the passage. The true secret of some of the objections to it, is the modern tendency to regard all miracles as useless lumber, which must be thrown overboard, if possible, and cast out of the Sacred Narrative on every occasion. Against this tendency we must watch and be on our guard.

Rollock remarks, “The Jewish people at this time was in a state of great confusion, and the presence of God was in great measure withdrawn from it. The prophets whom God had been accustomed to raise up for extraordinary purposes, were no longer given to the Jews. Therefore God, that He might not appear altogether to cast off His people, was willing to heal some miraculously, and in an extraordinary way, in order that He might testify to the world that the nation was not yet entirely rejected.” Brentius and Calvin say much the same.

Poole thinks that this miracle only began a little before the birth of Christ, “as a figure of Him being about to come who was to be a Fountain opened to the house of David.” Lightfoot takes the same view.

[Troubled the water.] This means, no doubt, “disturbed, agitated, stirred up,” the water of the pool. There is no reason for supposing that the angel visibly appeared in doing this. It is enough to suppose that at a certain hour there was a sudden stir and agitation of the waters, immediately after which they possessed the miraculous virtue of healing. — just as the waters at Marah became sweet immediately after Moses cast the tree into them. (Exod. xv. 25.)

[Whosoever then first.] This shows that the whole affair was miraculous. On no other supposition can we account for only one person being healed after the troubling of the water. That only “one” was healed, is plain, I think, from the wording of the passage.

[Of whatsoever disease he had.] These words would be more literally translated, “with whatsoever disease he was held.”
Bengel thinks that the use of the past tense throughout this verse shows that the miracle had ceased when John wrote. He “used to go down,”—“used to trouble the waters,” etc. Tertullian declares expressly that the miracle ceased from the time that the Jews rejected Christ.

5.—[Infirmity thirty and eight years.] This means the length of time during which the sick man had been ill. How old he was we do not know.

Baxter remarks, “How great a mercy is it to live eight and thirty years under God’s wholesome discipline! O my God, I thank Thee for the like discipline of eight and fifty years. How safe a life is this compared to one spent in full prosperity and pleasure!”

Those who see typical and abstruse meanings in all the least details of the narratives of Scripture, observe that thirty eight years was the exact time of Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness. They see in the sick man,—helpless and hopeless till Christ came,—a type of the Jewish Church. The pool of Bethesda is Old Testament religion. The small benefit it conferred,—viz., only healing one at a time,—represents the narrow and limited benefit which Judaism conferred on mankind. The merciful interference of Christ on the sick man’s behalf, represents the bringing in of the Gospel for all the world. These are pious thoughts, but it may well be doubted whether there is any warrant for them.

The notions that the pool of Bethesda was a type of baptism, and the five porches typical of the five books of the law, or the five wounds of Christ, appear to me mere ingenious inventions of man, without any solid foundation. Yet Chrysostom, Augustine, Theophylact, Euthymius, Burgon, Wordsworth, and many others, maintain them. Those who wish to see a full reply to the theory that the miracle at the pool of Bethesda is a typical proof of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, will find it in Gomarus, the Dutch divine. He takes up Bellarmine’s argument on the subject, and answers him completely.

6.—[When Jesus saw...knew...long time.] We need not doubt that our Lord knew this man’s history by that divine knowledge which, as God, He possesses of all things in heaven and earth. To suppose that He ascertained by inquiry the state of his case before speaking to him, is a weak, meagre, and frigid interpretation. As a practical truth, it is a most comfortable doctrine that Jesus knows every sickness and disease, and all its weary history. Nothing is hid from Him.

[He said unto him.] This is an example of our Lord being the first to speak and begin conversation, as He did with the woman of Samaria. (John iv. 7.) Unasked, unsolicited, unexpectedly, He mercifully addressed the sick man. No doubt He always begins in man’s heart before man begins with Him. But He does all things as a Sovereign, according to His own will: and it is not always that we see Him taking the first step so entirely of Himself as we do here.

[Wilt thou be made whole?] The English language here fails to give the full force of the Greek. It means, “Hast thou a will? Doest thou wish? Dost thou desire to be made whole?” The question was perhaps meant to awaken desire and expectation in the man, and to prepare him in some sense for the blessing about to be bestowed on him.

Is not this, to take a spiritual view, the very language that Christ is continually addressing to every man and woman who hears His Gospel? He sees us in a wretched, miserable, sin-sick condition. The one thing He asks us, “Hast thou any wish to be saved?”

7.—[The impotent man answered him, Sir.] The word rendered “Sir” is the same that is more commonly rendered “Lord.” It is the same that is rendered “Sir” all through the fourth chapter, in the history of the Samaritan woman.

[I have no man… put me into the pool.] This is no doubt mentioned as an intentional proof of the heartlessness and unkindness of human nature. Think of a poor invalid waiting for years by the water, and having not a single friend to help him! The longer we live on earth the more we shall find that it is a selfish world, and that the sick and afflicted have few real friends in
time of need. “The poor is hated even of his neighbour.” (Prov. xiv. 20.) Christ is the only un-failing friend of the friendless and helper of the helpless.

8.—[Rise, take up thy bed and walk.] Here, as in other similar cases, it is evident that miraculous healing power went forth with the words of our Lord. Thus, “Stretch forth thy hand” (Mark iii. 5); “Go show yourselves to the priests” (Luke xvii. 14). Commands like these tested the faith and obedience of those to whom they were given. How could they possibly do the things commanded, if impotent like the man before us? Where was the use of doing them, if still covered with leprosy, like the ten lepers? But it was precisely in the act of obedience that the blessing came. The whole power is Christ’s. But He loves to make us exert ourselves, and show our obedience and faith.

Augustine finds in the command, “Take up thy bed,” an exhortation to the love of our neighbours, because we are to bear one another’s burdens; and in the command, “walk,” an exhortation to love God! Such allegorizing appears to me very unwarrantable, and calculated to bring the Bible into contempt, as a book that can be made to mean anything.

9.—[Immediately... made whole...walked.] Here we see the reality of the miracle wrought. Nothing but Divine power could enable one who had been a cripple for so many years to move his limbs and carry a burden all at once. But it was as easy to our Lord to give immediate strength as it was to create muscles, nerves, and sinews in the day that Adam was made.

When we are told that the man “took up his bed,” we must remember that this probably was nothing more than a light mattress, carpet, or thick cloth, such, as is commonly used in hot countries for sleeping on.

10.—[The Jews.] Here, as in many places in St. John’s Gospel, the expression, “the Jews,” when used of the Jews at Jerusalem, means the leaders of the people,—elders, rulers, and scribes. It does not mean vaguely the “Jewish crowd” around our Lord, but the representatives of the whole nation,—the heads of Israel at the time.

[It is not lawful...carry...bed.] In support of this charge of unlawfulness, the Jew would allege not merely the general law of the fourth commandment, but the special passages in Nehemiah and Jeremiah, about “bearing no burden” on the Sabbath day. (Neh. xiii. 19; Jer. xvii. 21.) But they could not have proved that these passages applied to the case of the man before them.—For a man to carry merchandise and wares on the Sabbath was one thing. For a sick man, suddenly and miraculously healed, to walk away to his home, carrying his mattress, was quite another.—To forbid the one man to carry his burden was Scriptural and lawful. To forbid the other was cruel, and contrary to the spirit of the law of Moses.—The act of the one man was unnecessary. The act of the other was an act of necessity and mercy.—It might perhaps be urged, in defence of the Jews, that they only saw a man carrying off a burden, and knew nothing of his previous illness or his cure. But when we remember the many instances recorded in the Gospels of their extreme and harsh interpretation of the fourth commandment, it is doubtful whether this plea will stand.

11. —[He that made me whole the same said, etc.] The answer of the man seems simple. But it contains a deep principle. “He that has done so great thing to me was surely to be obeyed, when He told me to take up my bed. If He had authority and power to heal, He was not likely to lay upon me an unlawful command. I only obeyed Him who cured me.” If Christ has really healed our souls, should not this be our feeling towards Him P—” Thou bast healed me. What Thou commandest I will do.”

12.—[What man is he which said...Take up thy bed, etc.] Ecolampadius, Grotius, and many others, remark what an example this question is of the malevolent and malicious spirit of the Jews. Instead of asking, “Who healed thee?” they asked “Who told thee to carry thy bed?” They cared
not for knowing what they might admire as a work of mercy, but what they might make the ground of an accusation. How many are like them! They are always looking out for something to find fault with.

13.—[Wist not who it was.] It is most probable that the cripple really knew not who it was that had healed him, and had only seen our Lord that day for the first time. He was ignorant of His name, and only knew Him as a kind person, who came up and said suddenly, “Wilt thou be made whole?” and after curing him miraculously, suddenly disappeared in the crowd.

[Conveyed himself away.] The Greek word so rendered is peculiar, and only found in this place. Parkhurst thinks that it simply means “departed, or went away.” Schleusner says that the root of the idea is, “swimming out, or escaping by swimming,” and that the meaning here is, “withdrew himself secretly from the crowd that was in the place.” If so, it is not improbable that, as in Luke iv. 30, at Nazareth, and John x. 39, in the Temple, our Lord put forth a miraculous power in passing or gliding through the crowd without being observed or stopped.

14.—[Afterward...temple.] It is not clear how long a time elapsed before our Lord found the man whom He had healed in the Temple. If the theory be correct to which I adverted in the note on the first verse, there must have been an interval. The word “afterward” is literally “after these things.”

Chrysostom thinks that the circumstance of the man being found “in the temple” is an indication of his piety.

[Behold thou art made whole: sin no more, etc.] These words appear to point at something more than meets the eye. They are a solemn caution. One might fancy that our Lord knew that some sin had been the beginning of the man’s illness, and that He meant to remind him of it. It certainly seems very unlikely that our Lord would say broadly and vaguely, “sin no more,” unless He spoke with a significant reference to some sin which had been the primary cause of this man’s long illness. (See 1 Cor. xi. 30.) There are sins which bring their own punishments on men’s bodies: and I am strongly disposed to think that it may have been the case with this man. The expression, “a worse thing,” would then come out with more force. It would be “a heavier visitation,” a worse judgment even than this thirty eight years’ illness. A sick bed is a sorrowful place, but hell is much worse.

Besser remarks,—“It is a dreadful thing, when the correction and mercy of Divine love wearies itself with a man in vain. You that are sick, write over your beds, when you rise up from them in renewed health,—‘Behold thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.’” Brentius says much the same.

If sin was the cause of this man’s disease, and he had been ill from the effects of it thirty and eight years, it is plain that it must have been committed before our Lord was born! It is an instance, in that case, of our Lord’s perfect and Divine knowledge of all things, past as well as future.

15.—[Departed and told the Jews.] There is no proof that the man did this with an evil design. Born a Jew, and taught to reverence his rulers and elders, he naturally wished to give them the information they desired, and had no reason to suppose, for anything we can see, that it would injure his Benefactor.