

The Voice that Brings Life - or Judgment

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[0 : 00] Well, again, a warm welcome. I hope you've had a good morning and it's good to be with you all today. Have a chance to listen to God's word together.

Let's begin with a prayer. Dear Father, we do thank you for that pleasure and joy of coming to hear you speak to us through your word today.

And for all your great kindness in rescuing us, in reaching out to us from heaven with your grace. In choosing to love us when you could have left us.

In bringing us to know you. And we ask that now you will refresh us by the power of the Holy Spirit. May he remind us of the power of Jesus Christ.

Of his compassion. His unstoppable love. Renew our hearts now. Open our eyes to see our God. And our King. May we go back out this afternoon refreshed.

[1 : 07] Renewed. Re-empowered. To live in the joy of Jesus Christ and his salvation. Amen.

Amen. Well, we're carrying on with our series in John's gospel, which we've been doing for the past weeks.

We're in John chapter 5 today, new chapter. Perhaps you could turn with us to that. If you've got one of the church Bibles, it's on page 890.

That's John chapter 5 on page 890. Page 890. Page 890.

John chapter 5. 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.

In Aramaic called Bethesda. Which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids. Blind, lame, and paralyzed.

[2 : 16] One man was there who had been an invalid for 38 years. 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?

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.

Jesus said to him, Get up. Take up your bed. And walk. And at once the man was healed and he took up his bed and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. 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. But he answered them, The man who healed me, that man said to me, Take up your bed and walk.

They asked him, Who is the man who said to you, Take up your bed and walk? Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was. For Jesus had withdrawn as there was a crowd in the place.

[3 : 19] 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. The man went away and he told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed them.

And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus. Because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. Now the words we've just read remind us of the incredible life-giving power of Jesus Christ.

They remind us of his compassion, Of the way his voice reaches into our lives when we least expect it. And he transforms us when he speaks like that.

He is the life-giver and nothing can stand in his way. They remind us too that our reaction to these words decides everything for us. Because it is whether or not we are for or against this life-giver That decides whether we, in the end, will have life.

This Jesus is not someone who can be ignored. We must come to terms with him. We'll look at this passage in four parts. Firstly, we'll look at the compassionate voice of Jesus in verses 1 to 9.

[4 : 35] And then and again in verses 1 to 9, The life-giving voice of Jesus. Then in 9 to 16, the dividing voice of Jesus. And 9 to 16 again, the transforming voice of Jesus.

And all the while, while I'm talking about this, Remember that next week we'll be looking at Jesus' own explanation of what he's doing here. So we have to keep that in mind as we talk about this. And ideally to understand it completely to come back next week. But let's us begin with the compassionate voice of Jesus. Verse 1 tells us Jesus left Galilee, where he was last week, And he went up to Jerusalem for a religious festival.

He went up there and he went to a big pool called Bethesda, Which had five roofed colonnades. Before we get into the meat of everything, Just a quick side note.

For a very long time, skeptics said, and there were books written, To show that this, among other things, showed that John's gospel was clearly made up. It was not written by an eyewitness.

[5 : 41] Because as everyone who knows anything about architecture of that period knows, Colonnades are always square. You have four of them. You do not have five of them. And whoever wrote this must be a fool. And then about a hundred years ago, They dug up a pool in just the right part of Jerusalem, With five roofed colonnades around it.

Just another little example of the fact that This is a book that was written by someone who was there at the time. Who knows what he's talking about.

And who walked around these very places that he's talking about. But then onwards. All around this huge pool, 200 feet across, There were sick people.

Blind, lame, paralyzed. And it seems that there was a superstition at the time. That if you got into the water after it bubbled up, It was thought to be stirred by an angel.

Then you'd be healed. You'll see that in our passage, actually, verse 4 is missing. And there's a footnote at the bottom of the page, number 4, Which explains that.

[6 : 45] Very likely this was a note that people put Just in the margins of very early versions of the Bible. Some later copyists thought it was part of the Bible itself.

But that explains what's going on. All these people are waiting, hoping to be healed. And Jesus looks out at them all. All of these people hoping for healing.

And he zeroes in on one. Just one. And so we start with a question. Why does he pick out this one? And I don't think there's any real mystery there.

This is a man, verse 5, who has been ill for 38 years. We have no idea how old he was. But he's been ill and weak for nearly four decades.

However old he was, that's most of his life. He's someone who can't even put himself into the pool. The story tells us later. He's not mobile.

[7 : 42] He's unable to care for himself. This is a time without wheelchairs or painkillers, without disability support. This man has an utterly miserable situation, just lying there, likely day after day.

And Jesus asks him if he wants to be healed. Now it's very tempting to do a little bit of amateur psychiatry on this man. Those of us who have been sick for a long time do know that whether you want to be well or not becomes quite a complex thing.

But let's focus on the main thing this tells us. It tells us something very simple. What the man says back to Jesus, I have no one to put me into the pool.

This man is not just sick and helpless. He is friendly. Sorry, friendless, lonely, and hopeless. Jesus has focused like a laser on a man in the most desperate and awful situation.

And Jesus sees that and he decides to do something about it. He cares about him. There's no other reason that he picks out this man. You know, he's not particularly good.

[8 : 54] We see that later. Jesus is going to have to tear them off. He's also not even asking Jesus for it. Like the man we saw last week came up to Jesus and asked to be for a miracle.

But this man, he hasn't a clue who Jesus is. And he certainly doesn't have deep faith in Jesus. Again, he doesn't have a clue who this man is talking to him.

He's just some face in the crowd. Jesus picks this man out of compassion. Just a few weeks ago, I was talking to someone who became a Christian not so long ago.

And they admitted that the first years of their life, they've never really experienced genuine love at home or otherwise.

And that's a heart-rending, heart-aching thing to hear from someone, isn't it? To hear that someone doesn't really feel that their parents ever loved them, that they ever had friends who really were there for them, let alone anyone else.

[9 : 58] But then when they came to Jesus, they discovered a vast unconditional love and compassion that entirely changed everything. A love that took away the aching void that leaves.

And satisfied more deeply than the love of any mother or father could. It's the kind of Jesus we're talking about here. A Jesus who zeroes in on this man in complete compassion.

Secondly, in these verses, we see the life-giving voice of Jesus. When Jesus explains this miracle in verse 25, He will say, 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.

Jesus, in other words, has power to speak life into the dead. This man isn't dead. But he is, as far as we can tell, the next best thing.

There's no earthly hope for this guy. And though this man hasn't got a grain of faith, and remember that, he hasn't the faintest spark of it.

[11 : 12] Jesus just says, Get up. And he does. And perhaps you've seen modern faith healers or similar in action.

Or some of the charlatans you can see on satellite TV who promise healing. Now there are... You see them work up, first of all, a large crowd to an absolute fever pitch of excitement.

They get moving, passionate speeches and heart-rending music and exciting stories. And they pick someone up, someone who's been wired up with all that drama. Someone full of hope and of desperate longing.

And then with some theatrics and shouting and drama and laying on of hands and heart-wrenching emotional displays, they finally come and do their healing. Jesus isn't like that.

There's no warm-up. There's no theatrics. There's no emotionalism. This is a man, verse 13, who slips away at the first hint of a crowd. It isn't even like the genuine miracles that people of the time would have read about in the Old Testament.

[12 : 18] Most of those take a bit of prayer or a bit of time or something. One moment this man is lying hopeless and sick and alone. And after nothing more than a brief inquiry, someone he's never met says, Get up.

Take up the mat you're lying on and walk. You know, there's no cunning psychology here. There's no fakery or flummery. This is the real thing. His mere words bring life.

This is the voice of the king, the king of the universe who molded the stars with his voice. And that same voice can bring life to the dead, life to the hopeless, and life to this man who is lonely and alone.

And that's why in verse 24, as we see next week, Jesus will say, Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

That's the implication for us here. He sees us with the same compassion, even when we come with hands just as empty as this man. And his word has the same life-giving power.

[13 : 28] We are to listen to him. His love and his power are boundless. His voice is completely powerful.

He is completely free to do all of this for us. But then, verses 9 to 16, things take a little bit of a turn. It's a little darker.

We see the dividing voice of Jesus here. When people come face to face with the real Jesus, the power of Jesus, we react in one of two ways.

And this is the kind of judgment that Jesus brought the first time he came. Not that he's pointing out those to be condemned, but the reaction they have to him, or we have to him, reveals our hearts and our futures.

Verse 9 tells us that the day Jesus healed the man was the Sabbath, the Saturday, when God had commanded them to rest. And, of course, according to the customs of that time, the religious teachers had decided and elaborated on that, so that resting meant, among other things, not carrying anything at all, especially like the large straw-covered mat that this man has just bunged on his shoulder.

[14 : 46] So when the Jews, which in this passage, of course, means the Jewish authorities, the religious teachers and rulers, not Jews in general, everyone in the story is a Jew, when the religious authorities see this man carrying the mat, they get angry.

It's the Sabbath. It's not lawful for you to take up your bed, verse 10. And the man who has been healed says, The man who healed me, that man said to me, take up your bed and walk. And, you know, they're obviously shocked.

This isn't just one man carrying a mat. There's someone actually out there teaching other people to do this kind of abominable thing on the Sabbath. And, of course, notice what they don't say. They don't mention a single word of what's just happened to the man. They've just been told that a man who couldn't walk has been made so well that he can chuck his mat on his shoulder and stroll out of the place.

And they don't even seem to notice. They're blind to it. They don't see what's under their noses. They don't stop to weigh the evidence, to ask what's going on. They press on with the prejudices of their time, unable even to see outside of them.

[15:54] And the evidence here really is offered to them on a plate. You know, maybe they wouldn't have liked to hear it direct from Jesus. You know, in their eyes, he's an uneducated country bumpkin from Galilee.

But here they have an anonymized double-blind test, just like the best medical trials. They don't know who it is who's done it, and the man who's telling them doesn't know who's done it. They're just presented with two clear facts.

Someone healed a man who has been sick for 38 years and couldn't even walk. And this man told him to pick up his mat on the Sabbath. And they don't even pause to think.

And the story doesn't get any better from there. Verse 16, this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. And verse 18, this was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him.

And we know how that will end. And that is a warning to us, isn't it? We have to come to this story honestly, to ask ourselves whether we're willing to see outside the prejudices of our time, whether we're willing to weigh the evidence for who Jesus is.

[17:11] That evidence looks a little different for us, but it needs us to take the time to honestly ask ourselves whether we've taken it seriously and weighed it with an open mind.

And if we do, perhaps we will end up like the man who was healed. Fourthly, the transforming voice of Jesus. Also, 9 to 16. As we've said, there are two sides to the reaction to Jesus.

A reaction to his power goes one way or the other. There are people who have heard his voice and fled, and people who have heard his voice and begin in life. Now, at this point, I have to make an admission.

I have read this all my life and been rather uncharitable towards the man in this story. I've read it thinking, this has got to be the least grateful man Jesus ever healed.

You know, most of the story, he doesn't even know who Jesus is. He really doesn't seem to be the sharpest tool in the box. But as soon as he does find out, he goes and reports him to the authorities.

[18:17] What kind of guy is this? And I'm not alone. Some of the commentaries I read when I was repairing spend quite a long time discussing whether this guy was just thick or whether he's deliberately getting Jesus in trouble.

Now, he certainly isn't very impressive compared to some other characters in this gospel, particularly the blind man Jesus heals in chapter 9.

But let's look a little bit more closely. Now, first of all, Jesus finds him at the temple. That sounds good, doesn't it, incidentally? Maybe he's giving thanks for what's just happened.

And when he finds him at the temple, he tells him, sin no more, no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. Here, Jesus is showing us that he cares about more than just this man's body. He is doing something in this man's life that is more than this mere healing of his physical self. Because what threatens this man is not just illness, it is sin as well.

[19:19] And Jesus says to him, verse 14, sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. Those are pretty serious words, aren't they? Considering what has just happened to him.

There's a couple of possibilities. You know, perhaps he's saying, you cannot carry on your life of sin as if nothing had happened and expect to be in heaven with me. Show your trust in me by changing, because otherwise you will face eternal punishment.

Or perhaps, and I think this is slightly more likely myself, although both are true, perhaps he is talking about the sickness itself.

Sickness in the Bible is not necessarily, not usually the consequence of sin, but it does make it clear on occasion that it can be, that God can use illness and events in our lives to discipline us, to draw us back to him when we are least willing to hear him.

That's clear, for instance, in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul talks about people being sick for that reason. Or Acts chapter 5, when the consequences of lying to God are very serious.

[20 : 28] And I can say in my own life, and no others who can say the same, that sickness, whether used as a punishment or simply as a gentle discipline, is something that can bring us to face-to-face and really think about our relationship with God again at points where it has become distant or forgetful.

It's done me good. But what this tells us, either way, is that Jesus cares about this man deeply enough that though he was compassionate about his sickness, he is willing to use the sicknesses and circumstances of this man's life to draw him back to himself, to draw him ultimately to true life and to everlasting life.

Now that's a scary thought, but it's a good one. Now is Jesus successful in what he's doing here? Let's put ourselves in the man's shoes for a moment.

He's been lying by that pool for a long time. He's not used to high-powered meetings. He's not one probably for intense debate. He's been powerless for four decades.

And suddenly he's plunged right into face-to-face confrontation with the religious authorities, with powerful men, intimidating people, the people who control life in Jerusalem.

[21 : 53] And they want him to tell them who the man is who said to you, take up your bed and walk. Notice he never does that all through this story. He never does that.

He does find out who Jesus is. And he does tell them who Jesus is. But he says, it was Jesus who healed me. They want to talk about breaking Sabbath rules.

He wants to talk about the man who transformed his life. You know, this is basic evangelism. This is basic sharing your faith. He has no practice. He has no special knowledge. But he's going out and he's telling people, people who are likely going to be very angry with him, this is what Jesus did to me, for me.

See him in those terms as this person who has done something incredible for me. Jesus has picked up a man who knew nothing about him, who had nothing going for him, who had no hope.

And here he is, walking in to the most intimidating group of people in his city and saying, Jesus has done this for me.

[23 : 10] You see, Jesus knows what he's doing when he touches the life, however hopeless and helpless we may be. You don't have to be anything special to follow Jesus Christ. I suspect this man wasn't anything special.

You don't have to bring anything to the table. He didn't have anything. But will you listen to his voice? The voice that brings you to life. The voice that takes you away from your sin and back to hope for life.

So this passage leaves us with that choice, doesn't it? Will we be like the authorities of that time, burying our heads in the sand and stuck to the prejudices of our age, unable to face the evidence? Or will we be willing to let the compassionate voice of Jesus Christ sound in our lives? Not just with compassion, but with power.

Power to change it. Power to bring hope. Power to bring life. And power, in the end, as we'll see next week, to bring us into the age to come. Let's pray.

[24 : 10] Let's pray. Let's pray. Dear Lord, my words are very weak.

And as I've talked for the last few minutes here, they are just human words. And yet, through them, you still speak.

And we have heard your words today. And I pray that we would hear the power of them, the compassion of them, the transforming grace of them.

And that we would come and listen to you. In Jesus' name. Amen. Now in a moment, I hope you'll join us for coffee and tea or a sandwich if you have time.

But let's finish with a blessing. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

[25 : 24] Amen.