

T. Austin-Sparks:

Reading: John 5:1-18.

We have pointed out that the key to these signs is to be found in the reaction which took place toward them, and that is true in this case. Let us look at a few of the features.

First of all, we must note the Jewish setting of this sign. It was at the "feast of the Jews", and most likely that was the Feast of the Passover. In that case it would be the greatest of all the Jewish feasts and would account for the multitude being in Jerusalem at that time, for while it was not necessary for the people to go up there for the other feasts, it was imperative that they went up for the Passover. So there was a great multitude in Jerusalem at this time, and this sign was performed there, that is, at the very centre of Israel.

And then it was performed on the Sabbath Day. You will have noticed that the Sabbath is mentioned four times in these few verses. It was that which governed the whole life of Israel, and all the laws of Israel were gathered into it. It represented everything in the life of Israel.

I hope you are collecting all these features, because we are going to find our key to this sign in them.

One more feature. The man upon whom this sign was performed had been in his place of helplessness for thirty-eight years. That prepares our way toward the meaning of things, so we turn to have a look at this man.

He was an earthbound man. His bed was only a very thin mat and there was not an inch between him and the earth. He was well down on the earth, and was a fixture. But he had not accepted that position; he had been struggling with the earth and against his situation for thirty-eight years. It does not need much imagination to visualize him: every so often he made an effort to get up, struggled to get away from his bed. And then he had to fall back again - and he always came back to the place from which he started. Every effort to leave that bed only resulted in his having to fall back on it again. He was a prisoner of his bed. It was his master and he was completely helpless there. The thing which was supposed to give him rest gave him no rest at all. And he was in that position for thirty-eight years. That is long enough to show that the situation was hopeless!

Now we will look at the background. What is it that lies behind this? You will see why I spoke about the Jewish setting, for this is a picture of Israel under the law and Israel in the wilderness for thirty-eight years. The first generation that came out of Egypt reached the border of the land and then, because of unbelief, were turned back into the wilderness for thirty-eight years, and there they struggled under the burden of the law. They wanted to get away from their position but they never could. They wanted to get into the land, but never arrived there. If their own effort could have got them there, they would have been there, but the fact of the matter was that they were going round in a circle and were always coming back to the place from which they started. The bed of the law was only making them know the weakness of the flesh. It gave them no rest - it only showed them how helpless they were.

Of course, those of you who know your New Testament are already thinking of the Letter to the Romans, and especially Romans 7. Do you remember that chapter? Here is the poor man struggling under the law. He says: "The good which I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I practise... O wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:19,24). That is the man at the Pool of Bethesda: 'What I want to do I never can do. What I do not want to do (that is, stay here), I am having to do all the time. Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this dead body?'

Let us go back to Israel. You remember that the Letter to the Hebrews always speaks of the land of promise as 'God's rest'. It says of that first generation that they never entered into 'His rest', and that "there remaineth therefore a sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). Now the land of promise is shown to be a type of Christ in heaven: Christ risen from the dead. You see, Israel had to go through the Jordan when it overflowed all its banks. The swellings of Jordan were a type of death, and they had to go through death on to resurrection ground. Then the word to Joshua was that he should go up and possess the land. It is resurrection and ascension. It is Christ in heaven, victorious over death, and His people with Him there. As Paul says: "And raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6).

Well, now where are we in our New Testament? It is quite true - we are in the Letter to the Hebrews, but with this man at the Pool of Bethesda we are somewhere else, very distinctly: we are in the Letter to the Galatians, and you have to put the whole of that Letter right into these eighteen verses of John 5. What is the Letter to the

Galatians all about? First of all, it is about the bondage of the law and the law making nothing perfect but bringing everybody into bondage. The people who are under the law are in this Letter spoken of as being in bondage. The Apostle says that the Jerusalem which is below, or beneath, "is in bondage with her children" (Galatians 4:25). That is where the poor man was, in Jerusalem, but in bondage in the Jerusalem which is beneath. So Galatians first of all speaks about bondage under the law.

Then the second thing that the Letter to the Galatians speaks about is the spirit of sonship in Christ. You will recall that the great words of this Letter are 'sons' and 'the Spirit'. We are all sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ. It is sonship in Christ, and the spirit of sonship is the Holy Spirit.

Now we come back to John and hear the Lord Jesus saying: "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36); "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). What is the truth that makes us free from the bondage of the law? It is the great and glorious truth of our sonship in Jesus Christ.

Need I turn you to the Letter to the Galatians? The idea of liberty, 'liberty in Christ', is mentioned eleven times in that Letter, and that is more often than in all the other Letters put together. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1 - A.V.). And again: "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty" (Galatians 5:13 - A.V.). It is the liberty of the sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

And note again: the name 'Christ' is mentioned forty-three times in this little Letter. That is tremendously impressive. If it has a lot to say about the law and about liberty, it has far more to say about Christ. The law is broken in Christ, and all its bondage is destroyed for the sons of God. They are free by grace, and Christ has made them free.

I do not know whether this was in John's mind, but I do see that he had a great deal in his mind which we do not always notice. What I mean is this: Why was it that when John spoke about the Pool of Bethesda he said that there are five porches there? Was it the artist giving a little touch to the picture? Well, John was an artist in words, but the Holy Spirit was writing this thing through John, and five is the number of grace. Wherever you look in the Bible five is the number of grace. You and I carry that very number on both hands and both feet, if we are normal people; and more than that, we have five physical senses. Why, we are made up of fives! God meant us to be people of grace. This poor man was in bondage to the law, but "the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). And right there, in the presence of the bondage of the law, was this testimony to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

What is this sign, then? It is a wonderful sign! This man is a true picture and representation of what it means to be under the law. Jesus stood and cried: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28). What did He mean? The burden of the law was upon the people, indeed, it was a heavy burden for them. The Pharisees gave more than two thousand interpretations to the law of Moses, and said: 'The law of Moses does not mean that you have only to keep ten commandments; it means that you have to keep two thousand.' There was not a point in all their human life where this law was not applied and made their lives difficult. And all this was gathered up into the Sabbath: 'You must not make your bed on the Sabbath! You must not carry your bed on the Sabbath! You must not poke your fire on the Sabbath! You must do nothing on the Sabbath - you may not even walk more than three miles.' Two thousand regulations for their lives! The one thing that they were meeting every day, and especially on the Sabbath, was 'You may not'.

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). What has happened? Jesus has appropriated the Sabbath to Himself. It is no longer a day of the week - it is a divine person. (If the Seventh Day Adventists saw that, the whole of their system would go in five minutes!) No, Jesus is God's Sabbath. He is the end of God's works, and in Him God has entered into His rest. This is the 'rest which remaineth for the children of God' - not a day of the week or on the calendar, but a divine person, the Son of God. In Him we come to rest, and that which was our bondage is now our servant. In Him that against which we were always struggling is now our victory. Oh yes, Jesus is the Sabbath, and if we live in Him we shall not spoil the Sabbath. Every day should be a day of rest to our souls. Oh, this is a mighty thing that the Lord Jesus has done!

Now note: the Lord Jesus looked upon that which He did for this man as a very great and serious thing. When He found him in the temple He said to him: "Thou art made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing befall thee" (John 5:14). Now back to the Letter to the Galatians: "Ye were running well," said the Apostle, "who did hinder you?" (Galatians 5:7). 'You are returning, or are in danger of returning, to the old bondage. You are listening to

those Judaizers who want to bring you back under the bondage of the law, and if you go back there the last state will be worse than the first. It is a worse thing to fall away from grace than never to have been in grace.' That is what the Word says - 'a worse thing'. Oh, dear friends, we have been liberated from this whole law through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us walk, and continue to walk in our liberty. "Ye were running well" - that is better than walking. Let us not stop running.

To return to the Letter to the Hebrews. There are two phrases in that Letter which run right through. One is: 'Let us'... "Let us press on to full growth" (Hebrews 4:1 - R.V. margin). 'Let us', says the writer, 'go right on in Christ in the new position that grace has brought us to.'

Then there is the other word that is constantly recurring in this Letter: 'Lest'... "Lest there be any man that falleth short of the grace of God" (Hebrews 12:15): "Lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief" (Hebrews 4:11 - A.V.). It is a word of warning and precaution - the alternative to going on is going back.

Now, you see, all this is an explanation of the life which we have in Christ. It is a life which makes us free, delivers us from bondage, brings us into rest and opens up a grand and glorious prospect before us.

Let us hear the warning: "Sin no more". It is a sin to turn away from grace and to turn back to law. It is the sin of turning from liberty back into bondage. It says of this first generation of Israel in the wilderness: "And turned back in their hearts unto Egypt" (Acts 7:39). And the Lord says of such people: "My soul hath no pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:38). It is a terrible thing to lose the pleasure of the Lord! That is sin indeed.

Well, that is the dark side of the sign. But what a lot there is in this incident of the man at the Pool! What I have said about it is not just my own imagination, for all the New Testament afterward proves this to be true. See those disciples again. How defeated they were before the Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost! They were always trying to do the right thing and were always failing. They were always trying not to do the wrong thing and say the wrong thing, but they were always doing it. You are very sorry for them, are you not? You hear poor Peter saying: 'I will go with Thee, even unto death.' Well, that is a good resolve, a good intention. He meant well, but when it came to the test, did he do it? Oh no, he was in bondage to his own weakness. But look at that man on the Day of Pentecost! He, with the other eleven, are men who are set free. Oh yes, they are men at liberty. No more bondage! And the New Testament goes on to show this wonderful truth of deliverance in Jesus Christ from all bondage.

John was right in choosing this sign, and the Holy Spirit was right in choosing it. He knew all the wonderful doctrine and reality of grace that was in it. "Wouldest thou be made whole?" This is what it means to be made whole - to be taken out of the kingdom of the bondage of the law and to be put into the kingdom of the grace of the Lord Jesus.

I hope this appeals to your heart and that it is not just some interesting teaching! Oh, I am quite sure that if you were seeing it in the spirit there would be a smile on your face and a song in your heart. You would be singing: 'Free from the law, O happy condition!' That is what this man sang. I don't suppose he knew our hymn, but that was what he was singing - 'Free from that bed, O happy condition!'

May the Lord bring us into the blessing of the liberty which is in Christ!