

The Man at the Pool of Bethesda: Redefining Jesus
People Jesus Met, Part 36
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McLean Bible Church
May 2, 2010

You know, as many of you know, I just returned from leading our “Seven Churches of the Revelation” tour. While we were in Istanbul just outside the Blue Mosque, I gave a talk to our tour group about the Muslim religion and how it differs from true biblical Christianity. There are lots of ways that Islam differs from Christianity that are unique to Islam, just like Mormonism has its unique differences with Christianity. So does Scientology, Buddhism, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the New Age movement, but as I pointed out in my talk there at the Blue Mosque, there are two key places where every false religion disagrees with true biblical Christianity.

Place number one, difference number one is when it comes to the plan of salvation that they offer. The biblical plan of salvation, my friends, is based on four cardinal pillars. Number one is the absolute holiness of God. Number two is the sinfulness of man, not just in his actions but also in his essential human nature. Number three is the inability of man to save himself, and number four is the unmerited, unearned, undeserved grace of God, by which God offers us salvation as a free gift through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross.

In contrast to this plan, every other plan of salvation offered by every other false religion is based on human works, human merit, human effort, human worthiness in some form or another. That’s difference number one.

Difference number two between every false religion and true biblical Christianity is all about the person, the identity of Jesus Christ. It’s this second key difference that we want to talk about today.

Remember we’re in a series entitled “People Jesus Met.” Today Jesus is going to meet a man who is not able to walk; he hasn’t been able to walk for 38 years. Jesus is going to heal this man, and He’s going to use that healing as a platform to tell us who He is. We want to go back 2000 years and see what happened then, and then we want

to bring all of that forward and talk about what difference it makes to me now. That's our plan. Our passage is John chapter 5, and we begin at verse 1. Here we go.

John 5:1 says, "After these things, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate, a pool which in Aramaic is called Bethesda. This pool is surrounded by five covered porticos"—or porches. Now I can tell you, it's interesting that archaeologists have actually discovered the real location of this pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. It is just inside the old city, about a hundred yards from one of the ancient gates of the old city. That gate today is called either the Lion's Gate or St. Steven's Gate, but at the time of Christ, it was called the Sheep Gate.

You say, "Wow, Lon, that's wonderful! So the Bible is spot on when it gives us the location of the pool of Bethesda. Is that true?" Yes, it is, but there's more.

In 1956, when archaeologists began excavating the site of the pool of Bethesda, they found that in the middle, there was this enormous reservoir, this enormous pool, if you will, and it was surrounded by five covered porches, five covered porches—not four, not six, but five. Very interesting, is that not right? Yeah, in fact, what this does once again is support the mantra that we say here all the time. I want you to say it with me. Here we go. The more they dig out of the ground, the more the Bible proves to be right, and indeed it did with the pool of Bethesda.

Verse 3, "Here at the pool a great number of people with disabilities used to lie, the blind, the lame, the paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the waters, for an angel of the Lord would come to the pool at certain seasons and stir up the water, and whoever stepped into the water first was made well from whatever affliction they had."

Verse 5, "Now there was a man there who had been unable to walk for 38 years, and when Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for so long a time, Jesus asked him, 'Do you want to get well?'" Stop for a minute. Does this seem strange to you at all that Jesus would ask this guy, "Do you want to get well?" Does that seem like a strange question to you? It does to me.

You say, "Well, why would Jesus ask him something like that?" Well, I did a lot of thinking about it. Remember, we need to know that ancient Jerusalem was not ADA-compliant. We understand that, right? There were no ramps. There were no

elevators. There were no sloped sidewalks. There were no automatic doors. There were no power chairs. Accessibility was an unknown concept in the time of Jesus. So here you've got a gentleman who hasn't been able to walk for 38 years, who has been utterly helpless to get around for 38 years. I mean, who in their right mind wouldn't want to get well?

You say, "Yeah, Lon, I agree with that. So why did Jesus ask him the question?" Well, think with me for a second. If Jesus heals this man, if Jesus completely transforms this man's life, then what is this man going to have to do? Well, he's going to have to tell his story of what happened to him and how all of a sudden, he can walk again to everybody that he meets, to everybody that knows him. In other words, if Jesus does this healing for him, this healing is going to force this man to become a public outspoken unabashed witness for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The same is true today. In 1971, when the Lord Jesus saved me and transformed my life in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, everybody who knew me—my friends, my parents, my relatives, my fraternity brothers, my drug buddies, my drinking buddies—every one of them asked me the very same question. They all asked me, "What in the world happened to you?" And you know what? I had to tell them the truth. I was proud to tell them the truth, and the truth is that the living, risen, eternal Lord Jesus Christ changed my life!

But you see, part of the cost of the Lord Jesus saving me and healing me was that I had no choice but to become an outspoken, public, unashamed witness for Christ. Now this is what Jesus was really asking this gentleman. He was asking him whether he was prepared to stand for Christ without compromise and without fluctuation as part of the cost of healing, and the man was.

Verse 7, "The man answered, 'Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred, for while I am still trying to get in, someone else gets there before me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Arise. Forget the water in the pool, friend. Arise. Take up your pallet and walk.' And immediately the man became well and picked up his pallet and began to walk."

I don't know if you've ever broken an ankle or ever torn the ligaments in one of your ankles or your feet, but if you have like I have, and you've been in a cast and off your feet for two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, six weeks, at least in my case, and I'm sure in your case, when you first get that cast off, you can barely even walk and carry your own weight. Here's a man who had not walked in 38 years, not six weeks! Immediately upon being healed, not only can he carry his own weight, but he can actually pick up his heavy stretcher and carry it with him! Friends, when Jesus does it, He does it right, amen? Amen!

Now, verse 9, "Now the day on which this all took place was the Sabbath; therefore, the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, 'It is the Sabbath! You are not allowed to carry your pallet.'" Remember what we said earlier about being forced to be a witness for Christ? Well, here it comes in verse 11. "But the man replied, 'Well, the man who healed me said to me, 'Take up your pallet and walk!'" This is hysterical! Do you see the humor here? These rabbis come up and say, "You can't carry that pallet on the Sabbath," and the man says to them, "Excuse me, I lay there for 38 years next to that pool and none of you cats did anything to help me. This guy comes along and heals me. You know what? If you had healed me and told me to put my pallet down, I would have put it down, but He healed me and told me to carry it. I don't care what you say. I'm carrying it!" (applause) See, it's funny! (pauses) Oh well, all right. It is; it's hysterical!

Verse 12, "So the Jewish leaders asked him, 'Well, who is this fellow who told you to pick up your pallet and walk?' But the man who was healed did not yet know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd. Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, 'Behold, you have become well. Do not sin any more, lest something worse happen to you.'" Watch this. "Then the man went away and began telling the Jews." He told everybody--the leaders, his family, his friends, everybody who had seen him at the pool—that it was Jesus who made him well.

You say, "Lon, wow! This is great! What a great story! I mean, I just love happy endings! All is well that ends well, Lon." Well, wait a minute, friends. This isn't quite over yet. No, no, there's more to the story!

Verse 16, "So because Jesus was doing things like this on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders were persecuting Him. And Jesus said to them, 'My Father works on this day'"—that is, the Sabbath. Hey friends, atoms don't fly apart on the Sabbath. Planets don't crash into each other on the Sabbath. The sun doesn't fail to come up on the Sabbath. God works on the Sabbath! Jesus went on to say, "And I work on this day also."

Verse 18, "For this reason, the Jewish leaders were seeking all the more to kill Jesus, because not only was He breaking the Sabbath"—at least in their opinion—"but also because He was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God."

So let's summarize. This encounter that Jesus had here in John chapter 5 does not end with everybody being excited that Jesus has healed a poor helpless man. No, it ends with the Jewish leaders being even more determined than ever to kill Jesus because they could not stomach how Jesus had defined Himself, namely He made Himself equal with God.

Now that's as far as we want to go in our passage, because it's time now for us to ask our most important question, and I know that you guys have been going through withdrawal. I understand that. So we're going to fix that this morning. Here we go. All of you at our campuses, we want you to be a part of this, nice and loud. Are you ready? (minimal response) That doesn't inspire me with great confidence. Are we ready? All right, here we go. Ready? One, two, three—SO WHAT? Oh yes! Don't you feel better?

You say, "Lon, so what? You know what? I've never been to Jerusalem and seen the pool of Bethesda. As a matter of fact, Lon, I don't even live in Bethesda, Maryland, so what difference does any of this have to do with me?" Well, let's talk about that.

Friends, if I were to ask you the question, "What is the most radical single thing that the Lord Jesus ever claimed about Himself," I wonder what you would say. I know what I would say. Without a doubt, I would say the most outrageous claim Jesus ever made for Himself is that He was Jehovah God Himself in human flesh, as John 5:18 says, that He was equal with God.

This is place number two where Islam and every other false religion and philosophy disagree with Christianity. Many of these other religions and philosophies will acknowledge that Jesus was a good man. Some of them will even call Him a great man. Some of them regard Him as a fabulous moral teacher. Some of them will even say He was a prophet of God, but the one thing that none of them will accept, the one thing that all of them agree on in contrast to true Christianity is that Jesus was not Jehovah God Himself in human flesh.

You say, "Well, Lon, listen. I have always been told that this was never something Jesus claimed for Himself, that this was something His followers made up after He was already dead, but Jesus Himself never actually claimed to be God in the flesh. That's what I heard." Let me say to you, that is not so, kemosabe. No, no!

Actually Jesus claimed to be God in the flesh all the time. In John 8:53, the rabbis said to Jesus, "Who do You make Yourself out to be?" Well, what a great question! Let's see what Jesus answers. In verse 56, Jesus replied, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Abraham has been dead now, when Jesus said this, for 2000 years. "The rabbis said to Him, 'You're not even fifty years old yet, and You have seen Abraham?'"

Verse 58, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was, I am." Now that's lousy grammar, but it's great theology, and let me tell you why. Jesus here is referring back to Exodus chapter 3, where Jehovah God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, and you will remember that God said to Moses, "I want you to go back to Egypt and bring My people out."

Here's what Moses said in Exodus 3:13. He said, "Suppose I go back to the Israelites, and I say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and suppose they say to me, 'Well, what is His name?' What shall I tell them?" Verse 14, "Then Jehovah said to Moses, 'I am who I am. Tell them that I am has sent you.'"

So folks, when Jesus says in John 8:58, "Before Abraham was, I am," what He was doing is claiming to be the great I am of the Old Testament, Jehovah God Himself wrapped in human flesh. The rabbis knew exactly what He was claiming. Verse 59, "At this, the rabbis picked up stones to stone Him." Why? Because stoning was the

penalty for blasphemy, and for a man to claim that he was Jehovah God in the flesh, they were convinced that was blasphemy.

Hey, Jesus made this claim for Himself in other places. In John chapter 10, Jesus replied in verse 30 and said, "I and the Father are one." Therefore the rabbis once again picked up stones to stone Him. In fact, most of Jesus' meetings with these guys ended this way. This was the standard ending.

Verse 32, "So Jesus said to them, 'I've shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of them are you stoning Me?' And they replied, 'We're not stoning You for any of these miracles but for blasphemy'"—watch now—"Because You, a mere man, claim to be God."

One more example is in John 14:8. "Then Philip said to Jesus, 'Lord, show us the Father, and that will be sufficient for us.' And Jesus said, 'Philip, have I been with you this long, and you still don't know who I am? He who has seen Me has seen the Father.'" How do you say it any more clear than that?

Friends, not only did Jesus say it, but He backed it up. He backed it up with His miracles and with His healings. He backed it up with walking on water and turning water into wine. He backed it up with His power over demons and over disease and by raising people from the dead. Of course, the crowning proof of all that Jesus is telling us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth when He tells us He is Jehovah God in the flesh was His own resurrection from the dead. Romans 1:4 says, "Jesus was"—what's the next word? Say it!—"authenticated"—hello!—"with power to be the Son of God, to be deity"—how?—"by His resurrection from the dead."

Now let's bring all of this forward into the twenty-first century, shall we? Let's say that Jesus' claim today to be Jehovah God in human flesh is just as clear and just as definitive and just as unambiguous as when He made the claim in the first century. Folks, as sad as it is, if people in our world want to resist Jesus, then we must allow them to do that. As sad as it is, if people in our world want to reject Jesus and resent Jesus, if people in our world want to reproach Jesus, then we have to allow that. If people in our world want to refuse Jesus or renounce Jesus, then we have to allow that, but the one thing we cannot allow as His followers and the one thing we must not

allow as His followers is for people to redefine Jesus or redefine His plan of salvation or to redefine anything else that He says in the Bible. That is what we cannot allow.

To take this stand in certain places in our world might very well cost a person their life, just like it cost Jesus His life, just like it cost thousands of early Christians their lives, here in America to take this stand and to refuse to let people redefine Christ and what He said probably won't cost us our lives, but it might cost us our popularity. It might cost us our job. It might cost us a promotion. It might cost us some friends. It might cost us an inheritance. It might even cost us the chance to speak at the Pentagon Prayer Day. Do you know what I'm saying? Maybe.

But folks, it doesn't really matter what the cost is. As followers of Jesus Christ, it is our duty. It is our sacred responsibility, and yea, it is our privilege to stand firm on the identity of Christ, to stand firm on everything He said, regardless of the cost.

You know, several weeks ago, on one of the first really beautiful days of spring—it was a Friday—my wife Brenda and I had a wonderful idea. We said, "Why don't we take our two older grandchildren"—they are five and three—"and we'll go down to Washington to the zoo?" The only problem with our idea is that about 75% of Washington had the same idea. That was the only problem with it.

The traffic on Connecticut Avenue was atrocious! It was horrible. Finally, I said, "Look, let's just park and walk," so praise the Lord, praise the Lord, we had two strollers. We parked, put the kids in the strollers, and walked almost a mile up Connecticut Avenue to the zoo. As we were walking, of course, we passed the Uptown Theater. As we walked past the Uptown Theater, I was reminded again why this would be such a great spot for McLean Bible Church to plant a community campus!

Now some of you may remember that back in 2007, we had actually reached a deal with the owners of the Uptown to open a campus there, and everything was going great, until the acting D.C. zoning director stepped in and stopped the whole thing. In an article from October of 2007, *The Washington Post* said, "The news"—that is, that we had been stopped—"cheered opponents of the church. They had been lobbying city officials since the church announced in July that it had leased the Uptown on Sunday mornings." The Post continues, "And parking isn't the only issue. The evangelical

mission of the church has also turned off some residents of Cleveland Park, where a large synagogue stands two blocks from the Uptown. The church and Solomon are strong backers of Jews For Jesus," and in the article, George Idelson, the president of the Cleveland Park Citizens' Association, was quoted as saying, "I have no doubt that there are people who are disturbed that an evangelical church is coming in here to proselytize."

Well, we then found another great location in downtown D.C., the Harman Theatre, right across from the Verizon Center. We were just about to sign a letter of intent to lease the Harman Theatre when, in a meeting, someone asked the question whether we would preach against homosexuality and abortion. We told them that we don't preach on these subjects every week or anything close to it, but when we do mention them, we teach and preach the biblical position on these subjects, namely that God loves gay people so much that He died on the cross for them, but nonetheless, their behavior is sinful and offensive to almighty God, and that God forgives people who have had an abortion and heals the pain that comes from having an abortion, but nonetheless, an abortion is the killing of an innocent life.

Well, we got a letter the next week from Michael Kahn, the programming director at the Harman Theatre. In the letter, he said to us that he had initially supported our use of the Harman Theatre, "only after I was assured by my staff that your church did not uphold any anti-gay or anti-abortion philosophy in its teaching." He went on to say, "I certainly support your right to espouse any tenets in which you believe, but as a not-for-profit organization that has a large number of members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, both on our staff and as members of our audience, I must respectfully decline your inclusion in our theatre."

There were a bunch of blogs that were flying around when we were trying to do all of this. I would like to share two of them with you. You can go online and read the rest of them. Blog number one says, "McLean Bible Church's mission is to convert Jews and other non-church persons and to enlarge and enrich their already enormous congregation. They are an arrogant, aggressively proselytizing, Bible-banging church that gives Christians everywhere a bad name."

Then blog number two says, "Tolerance is a virtue, but one is not obliged to tolerate everything and everybody. McLean Bible Church has earned my contempt. The Jewish community in particular will not assist this church in its mission." We didn't ask them to! I would just like to add that. We didn't ask them to. Let's go back to the blog. "The Jewish community in particular will not assist this church in its mission to convert all of D.C. to its brand of arrogant Christianity. Let them play that game somewhere else."

Now ladies and gentlemen, I want to say to you that here at McLean Bible Church, we are utterly, totally, passionately committed that with the help of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are going to open a campus in downtown Washington, D.C. (applause) But, but to do so, we are not willing to redefine who Jesus said He is or anything He said in the Bible. We are not willing to redefine that even by 1%. Do you agree with that? (applause) We're not doing that! We're going to trust God. I'm telling you, God's going to allow us to stand our ground, and He's going to give us a place in Washington, D.C. and many other places.

Folks, this is where we as a church must stand. We must stand on the deity of Christ. We must stand on the biblical plan of salvation. We must stand on everything that the Bible clearly teaches. Not only must we stand here, but this is where we must suffer. This is where we must pay any price that is required of us, but we dare not move off this spot ever as McLean Bible Church.

Now I'm going to go from preaching to meddling. Can I do that? Let me say, this is not just a position that McLean Bible Church needs to have. Friends, if you're a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and if I'm a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, this is a position that you and I as individuals must also have. We must take our stand on these very same issues. We must suffer for these very same issues, and we must be willing to pay any price that is required of us rather than to let someone redefine Jesus Christ in our presence, redefine His plan of salvation in our presence, redefine anything He says in the Bible in our presence without us offering an objection.

This is what Paul said in Philippians 1:29. He said, "For it has been granted to us on behalf of Christ not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake." Why did

Paul say this? Well, because Paul knew, my friends, that if you and I refuse to allow people—our relatives, our friends, our co-workers, our neighbors—to redefine Christ and His plan of salvation in our presence, then we're going to pay a price for it. Paul knew that, and yet I love what he says. He says, "For it has been granted to us"—this is a privilege. This is not a burden. This is a privilege to suffer for the Lord Jesus Christ. After 40 years of being a follower of Christ myself, I can testify, friends, when you stand for Christ, you are going to pay a price. I consider it a wonderful privilege to do this, and so should you.

Not only is it a privilege, but folks, there's a reward attached. Here's what Jesus said. He said in Revelation 2:10, "Be faithful even unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." I'm so glad that when I get to heaven, the people handing out the crowns are not the residents of Cleveland Park, aren't you? I'm so glad that when I get to heaven, the person handing out rewards is not Michael Kahn from the Harman Theatre, aren't you? I'm so glad that when I get to heaven, the people giving out crowns are not any of those bloggers; it's the Lord Jesus Christ. Friends, are we really concerned what the bloggers and everybody else thinks, or are we concerned about what the Lord Jesus Christ thinks? Be faithful even unto death. It's okay, because Jesus said, "I run heaven, and when you get there, I've got crowns to give out. Don't you worry about what it costs you down here. You just stay faithful, and you watch. I'll reward you here, and I'll reward you there." Folks, this is our charge. This is our duty. This is our privilege both as a church and as individual followers of Christ. May we rise to it, and may we be good representatives of the Lord Jesus here on earth. Let's pray.

Father, thanks for challenging us today to stand without negotiation, without equivocation, without compromise and without wavering for who the Lord Jesus said He is and for what He said about how to get to heaven and for everything else He says in the Word of God. Father, give us the courage we need. Give us the strength we need. God, give us the godly steadfastness that we need to face whoever it may be and to refuse to let them redefine Christ and what He says in our presence without us offering objection. Lord Jesus, use us and make us great representatives, faithful

representatives for You here on this earth, both as a church and as individual followers of Christ, and we pray these things in Jesus' name, and what do God's people say?
Amen. All right!