

## Do You Want to Get Well?

John 5:1-15

For years, many people have voiced serious doubts as to whether or not academics holds any priority at all in most successful, major college athletic programs. One college football coach was faced with the possibility that a star player might be declared academically ineligible. He pleaded with the math professor not to flunk the kid

“I’ll tell you what, coach,” said the professor, “I’ll ask him a question right in front of you. If he gets it right, I’ll pass him. If not, I’ll have to fail him.” The athlete was called in, and the professor asked, “What’s two and two?”

“Four,” replied the player.

Frantically, the coach jumped in pleading, “Give him another chance! Give him another chance!”

Few would argue that the actual educational objective behind the college experience can easily be misplaced, but for that matter, the actual objectives behind many kinds of experiences can be misplaced. The Bible speaks of an experience called “being born again,” meaning that by the blood of Christ and through faith in Him, sinners receive God’s forgiveness and cleansing. The books are cleared. We can begin our spiritual lives again. And, if we will continue to face our sins and call them what they are, the assurance that forgiveness is available for future sins is also ours - but why? Because God loves us? Sure. But what is God’s actual objective in saving sinners?

... <sup>21</sup>Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. <sup>22</sup>You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; <sup>23</sup>to be made new in the attitude of your minds; <sup>24</sup>and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. - Ephesians 4:21-24

Jesus did not endure the ordeal of the cross so that there might simply be a little distance between us and our past sins. He came to recreate us in true righteousness and holiness. God doesn’t give us second chances just so we can turn around and repeat our mistakes. Now, don’t get me wrong. God has given each of us multiple second chances, and many of us do repeat old mistakes. But, God is looking in us for the development of a particular attitude towards our sins. He wants us to despise our sins, which is the first step to leaving them behind. If a man continues to sin, because doing so pleases him and because he feels safe in doing so, he has missed the point of grace.

Before we explore what one particular healing of one particular invalid teaches us about Jesus’ ultimate objective of calling us out of our sin and into His holiness, let us consider the setting.

<sup>1</sup>Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. <sup>2</sup>Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. <sup>3</sup>Here a great number of disabled people used to lie - the blind, the lame, the paralyzed.

The text immediately preceding ours takes place in Cana AND Capernaum of Galilee. Jesus had encountered a “royal official” in Cana who asks for the healing of his sick son who is in Capernaum. By the power of His word, Jesus heals the man’s son without going to him. The phrase, “Some time later,” accounts for how the story of Jesus abruptly picks up in Jerusalem.

It was the time of one of the Jew's feasts, but John does not tell us which one. Scholars who trace the chronology of Jesus' ministry would love to know, but John was writing to gentiles and, apparently, did not consider this information relevant to his narrative. After healing the official's son in Galilee, Jesus "went up" to Jerusalem, which was due south. We would not refer to a trip south as "up". Our maps condition us to think of "up" as north and "down" as south. To the ancients, "up" was up. Jerusalem was on Mount Zion at a higher elevation than Galilee.

The story takes place at the "sheep something." The text supplies one adjective meaning "of the sheep" but no noun to go with it. The *King James Version* speculates and calls this a "sheep market." Most other versions speculate that John means the "Sheep Gate." Jerusalem did, in fact, have a Sheep Gate in the northeast section of the wall, which would be one obvious entry point into Jerusalem from Galilee. But, put all that aside, for the story hinges on none of these details. Somehow, by dragging himself, or through the assistance of others, a man who has been unable to walk for nearly four decades is at this pool, believing that its waters have curative properties.

This pool, called Bethesda, was flanked by five covered porches that served as shelters where "a great number of disabled people used to lie" (verse 3). Water fascinated the ancient Jews. Vast bodies of water such as the sea were foreboding. The abyss was considered the abode of demons. This is why the new heaven and new earth described in Revelation 21 are depicted as having no sea. But, the Jews liked moving or "living water" as they called it, which they believed to have healing powers. They liked the Jordan River. They liked natural springs. They liked a number of pools in the city like this that bubbled up from time to time because of the springs beneath them.

The locals in Jerusalem attributed the occasional movement of the waters of Bethesda to an angel that came down and stirred the pool. When this happened, they also believed that the first one in the pool could be healed. In fact, a copyist sometime after the fourth century added a verse to explain this. The words appear as verse 4 in the body of the *King James* text. You will see it as a footnote if you are holding a *New International Version*: "- and they waited for the moving of the waters. <sup>4</sup>From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease he had."

Clearly, the addition is a valid reflection of what the locals believed about the pool, for the man says to Jesus in verse 7, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred."

It was feast time. Jerusalem was crowded. In the midst of the ruckus, Jesus sought out one particular man, who through imparity and the passing of days, weeks and years, had surely lost hope that his life could ever be significantly improved. Nevertheless, Jesus found him and asked him, "Do you want to get well?" It almost seems like a silly question, but Jesus doesn't ask silly questions, so reserve your judgment at least until we have considered the requisites and responsibilities that accompany getting well.

## **I. The Requisites for Getting Well (verses 5-9a)**

... <sup>5</sup>One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

<sup>7</sup>"Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

<sup>8</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." <sup>9</sup>At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

## A. Divine Healing Comes Only to the Helpless

Imagine the tedium of 38 years of just sitting by a pool day in and day out? Boring! Wait, wait, and wait. I've been known to make right turns all over this county just to avoid waiting at red lights. Last week, Linda and I had to wait about forty minutes to take a riverboat ride in San Antonio. A couple of mallards floated by, one male and one female. I commented on what I knew of nature's wisdom in marking the male more brilliantly so that the female could enjoy the cover of camouflage when nesting. Did that sound like I was trying to start something? Linda insisted that she was just saying what popped into her head: "I read a story about how marriages tend to be successful when the woman's a lot more attractive than the man." Doesn't that sound like an odd thing to have just popped into her head?

Anyway, the tedium of this invalid's wait must have been broken when Jesus walked up and said, "Do you want to get well?" Jesus approached the most pitiful figure on the scene, a man who had been powerless to ambulate himself for 38 years. "Invalid" means "without strength." Were he to have stumbled across a medical cure for his ailment, his legs would probably still have been hopelessly atrophied. Whether crippled, paralyzed, or weak from a chronic illness we cannot know. Whatever his condition, he lacked the physical strength to move himself quickly enough to beat others into the water when it moved. Deliverance for this man required steps that he could not take for himself or, at least the presence of some friend willing to act in his behalf.

What a vivid picture this is of our own experience with sin and salvation. We were powerless to save ourselves. We had no one to come to our aid. Later, Paul would reflect upon our desperate state as well as upon the Champion Who did step in for us and bring healing to us.

<sup>6</sup>You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.  
<sup>7</sup>Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup>But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. – Romans 5:6-8

## B. Divine Healing Is Only for the Hungry

Jesus asked His odd question, "Do you want to get well?" Isn't that a "no-brainer?" Of course, he wanted to get well, didn't he? I suppose, but after 38 years, how much real hope remained that hanging around the pool would accomplish anything? Is it far-fetched to think that he was not really that accustomed to thinking about a life that was healthy and whole? It was perfectly valid for Jesus to probe this man's desire to be well. A new life would mean new responsibilities. It would mean standing on his own two feet and being answerable for his own life. It would mean finding a job to provide for himself rather than to beg or rely on friends and family. "Do you want to get well?" was an appeal to a will that was every bit as paralyzed as the man's body.

Lord Kenneth Clark, internationally known for the BBC television series *Civilization*, lived and died without Jesus. He admitted in his autobiography that while visiting a beautiful church he had what he believed to be a powerful religious experience. "My whole being," he wrote, "was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy far more intense than anything I had known before." But the "gloom of grace," as he described it, created a problem. If he allowed himself to be influenced by it, he knew he would have to change ... So he concluded, "I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course."

The most powerful religious experience in the world might shake you to the core. But, if you walk away and do nothing, if you don't say "Yes" to whatever experience is calling you into, what has been accomplished? You might just build up a resistance to similar experiences.

I suspect that more people than we can imagine innately understand that to be right with God demands that they live differently with the world, but the modern church is terrified that such a demanding gospel cannot sell. When Jesus called people to Himself, He was brutally honest with them. He told them that following Him on the road to true life could involve crosses, sacrifice and even persecution. We tend to downplay these realities. Obviously, we want everyone to embark on the road to true life, but if they know about the perils, they might be scared off. In the meantime, we try to attract people to Jesus in volume by masking the demands of following Him. We market activities, fellowship and the hint that Jesus offers quick fixes to everyday struggles. We seem positively embarrassed that the greatest promises of faith are for a life that is not of this world.

Do you really want to get well? This is not a weird question. It is an honest one that is probably not asked nearly often enough. Are you ready to stop living behind facades? Are you ready to abandon the shallow vanity of self-centeredness? Are you ready to face the utter emptiness of a life that revolves around pleasure and acquiring things? Is walking in the light of forgiven sin worth abandoning the darkness? Jesus didn't die for our sins so that we can continue to go on our merry, self-indulgent ways. With a simple command, Jesus healed an invalid. But, Jesus would have more to share with this man about the responsibilities that come with being delivered.

## **II. The Responsibilities for Getting Well (verses 9b-15)**

### **A. God's Gracious Work for Us Constrains Us Only to Respond to Him verses 9b-13**

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath,<sup>10</sup> and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."

<sup>11</sup>But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'"

<sup>12</sup>So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"

<sup>13</sup>The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

Jesus found this man. The man did not seek out Jesus. In fact, as it turns out, the man did not even know who Jesus was before this encounter. This man had been powerless for 38 years, superstitiously hanging out at the pool, but it was Jesus Who initiated his restoration to wholeness. Jesus spoke. The man got up as commanded. There is no record of wobbling. Jesus did not prescribe any follow-up regimen of physical therapy. It was a remarkable work of unabashed grace.

The miracle is understated. Were it not for that little detail that the man had been crippled for 38 years, we might miss just how remarkable this healing was. I guess this is why I have always been a little perplexed at how these Jews (and the Pharisees up in Galilee) tended to react to things that would steal the breath of normal people. Rather than to go weak in the knees, they complained, "Hey you can't carry that bed on a Sabbath!" Talk about missing the big picture!

Some rabbis felt that an accidental breach of the Sabbath warranted a sin offering. A willful, blatant offence might warrant stoning. Carrying a load was forbidden on the Sabbath. To the most legalistic minds, this included wearing jewelry. Through the years since, orthodox rabbis have engaged in lively debates as to whether a man can wear his false teeth or his wooden leg on the Sabbath. But, when interrogated by the pious stuffed shirts of Jerusalem, one has to love the answer this man gave: "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'"

“There was this guy – never saw him before – didn’t catch his name. He told me to pick up my mat and walk. For the first time in 38 years, my legs actually moved when I told them to, so I didn’t ask questions. When I felt strength that I have not known for as long as I can recall, I guess I plumb forgot it was the Sabbath. Sorry. My bad. Of course, had it dawned on me what day it was, it probably would not have mattered. When He said, ‘Move,’ I moved. I wasn’t about to argue with a man who heals by a single word.”

## **B. Divine Deliverance from Sin Necessitates a Pursuit of Holiness verses 14, 15**

<sup>14</sup>Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” <sup>15</sup>The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Jesus’ interest in this man ran deeper than just his ability to walk. The fact that Jesus “found him” implies that He had been searching for him. He wanted to link wellness to ceasing to sin. No man was ever healed in order to go on sinning or cleansed so that nothing might ever be different. We are healed by grace to be free of sin. Jesus warned that something worse might happen if the man did not change his ways. Perhaps, his infirmity was linked to a checkered past. Not every affliction stands in a direct “cause and effect” relationship with a specific sin, but some do. Being found at the temple was a good start. Perhaps, he was thanking God for his good fortune.

Deliverance should always drive us toward holiness. Whatever it takes, seek holiness. You can pursue holiness out of gratitude, or you can do so out of holy fear. Both are powerful incentives that have served God’s saints through the ages, but know this: You must pursue holiness. Jesus didn’t endure all He endured to save us just to turn us over to sin again. That’s *NOT* an option.

We are all crippled by our sins. Do you want to be well? Then, know what wellness demands. It is not mere absolution for our misdeeds. It is life reoriented towards the righteousness of Jesus.