

Get Up And Walk!

By: Rev. Chad Trivett

Reading from John 5, verses 1-15;

"Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² 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.

³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed, ⁴ and they waited for the moving of the waters.

From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.

⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ 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?"

⁷ "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."

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴ 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."

¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well." (NIV)

This story leaves us with a mixed bag of emotions.

There are so many unexpected interactions between Jesus and this man, this man and the Jewish leaders.

The incident took place during a festival. It's inconclusive as to which festival, however, there would have been great crowds at the Temple and in Jerusalem during any of the possible festivals - The Feast of Tabernacles, Passover or Pentecost.

Depending on the Greek manuscript, the name of the pool differs. Some call it Bethesda, others Bethsaida, others still Bethzatha.

Being located in Northern Jerusalem, Bethzatha is likely the closest name, as the neighbourhood in that area of Jerusalem was called Bethzetha.¹

If we ever had three kids I would name them Bethsaida, Bethzatha and Bethesda.

They would all be called Beth for short. Imagine that! “Hey Beth, time for dinner!” and all three would come! Haha!

Under St. Anne’s church a little north of the Temple, archeologists have discovered a spring fed pool with the remains of five pillars as described in our story.

There are inscriptions on some of them which speak of ancient superstitions ascribing healing powers to the water.²

Movement of the water caused by the intermittent spring, in primitive times, attributed the action to a local deity. Jewish superstition substituted an angel in place of the local deity.

This superstition was later inserted into our passage as verse 4 to explain the nature of the conversation between the man and Jesus.

Verse 4, the details of an angel stirring the waters, is not found in any Greek manuscripts prior to the 4th century.

Although there is no question people gathered at the pool hoping to be cured from an ailment, verse 4 is a gloss added to further explain the nature of their interaction.³

Jesus knows of the pool, has been at the Temple, participating in the festivities, and makes his way over to the colonnade.

He knows what he’ll find there.

A lot of people suffering from various ailments.

Superstitions have a lot of power! Not only back then, but today as well.

Perhaps this water had certain minerals which actually did heal some people, earning its reputation.

The water of the Dead Sea has healing properties, water with certain salts have healing properties.

While living in Japan, Sasha and I went to various hot springs - some known to be very good for your skin.

There was one we would go to quite often that had a giant, 15 foot high by 10 feet wide pink Himalayan sea salt rock right in the middle of a round pool.

People would come to walk around this salt rock in a circle because it had ‘healing properties’.

There was also a separate pool off to the side in which they had filled with water from the Dead Sea.

¹ Interpreters Bible Comm. Pg.540.

² Ibid

³ Expositor’s Bible Comm. Pg.62.

If you had any cut or open sore it would sting!

Sasha and I went in the Dead Sea pool a number of times - it was fun because you didn't sink - you could float effortlessly.

Perhaps many people with various ailments did experience healing, and the superstitions developed from there.

But there is no comparison to the power of Jesus and the healing properties of the water!

Jesus goes to the pool of Bethzatha, looks around at the people gathered by the waters.

Many, many sick people are there in hopes of being healed.

There sits a man with a down trodden face.

In his 50's, 60's, perhaps.

Clearly broken - in body and in spirit.

Invalid, unable to make his own way into the water on his own.

He can't walk and therefore has resolved to a life of begging, depending on others for sustenance.

That word for invalid, *astheneia*, means without strength. It expresses the weakening influences of the illness, especially as someone becomes wrongly and overly dependent.⁴

Jesus can see this man's problem is much deeper than a physical illness. His spirit is broken.

For many people physical illness breaks their spirit.

For others, an illness gives opportunity for a broken spirit to justify its weak will and brokenness which was already there.

Either way, upon learning about his condition, Jesus approaches this man and strikes up a conversation with him by asking an interesting question.

Keep in mind, Jesus had been hanging around the pool for some time now, chatting with the people, asking about many of them.

Here was a Rabbi, came to the pool and was asking about the people there.

Jesus learned the back story of this man before approaching him.

What was Jesus doing?

Likely looking for the poorest soul to help.

Someone who was utterly crushed in body and spirit.

Why did Jesus pick out this man to heal?

⁴ Helps Word Studies, Bible Hub, *astheneia*.

Because he wanted to demonstrate the depths of his power, to inspire faith in others to come to him.

As Arthur Gossip in the Interpreters Commentary says: *"No one is beyond the reach of Christ's helping hand."* (pg.539)

And this man was not only broken in body, but broken in spirit - powerless on the inside as much as he was on the outside.

As Merrill Tenney in John The Gospel of Belief points out, *"Jesus is interested in restoring those who have been reduced to utter helplessness both in body and spirit."* (pg.105)

As Jesus approaches, the man looks up, sees this Rabbi and perhaps expects some money, or food, or the typical hand out he was so accustomed to receiving.

Instead, Jesus, knowing this man had been laying invalid for 38 years asks him, *"Do you want to get well?"*

What?

This person who has been living hell for 38 years, who has been robbed of life's glamour and fullness for his best years - isn't the answer obvious?

It appears by his answer that he has accepted his fate.

After 38 years, surely, he could have had someone help him into the water!

Jesus is challenging his will to become well.

There is a hopelessness in his answer. He was placing the blame of his condition on what others were not doing for him.

Jesus is asking, "Do you want to be well or are you going to remain blaming others and feeling sorry for yourself?"

Are you going to escape using your condition to have people take pity on you? Using your condition for attention, to justify your giving up on life?"

"Do you want to get well?" asks Jesus.

That word for *want* is desire, theilo. It means "to will, to wish - wanting what is best because someone is ready and willing to act.

It is commonly used of the Lord extending his 'best offer' to the believer - wanting to birth his faith in them which also empowers, manifests his presence."⁵

Jesus asks us the same question, 'Do you want to get well?'

Why would anyone say no?

Because to place our trust in Christ means dying to self.

⁵ Helps Word Studies, Bible Hub, theilo.

We like to hold onto our pity parties, our excuses not to get better.

Or we aren't willing to make the changes needed to get better.

We develop crutches to justify our inaction, to cover up our fears of failure, to justify our comforts which we know aren't good for us, or are used as distractions from what's really going on inside us.

The wellness Jesus offers us requires us to die to self - unless the seed dies it will not find life - 'Do you want to get well?' Do we?

Arthur Gossip poetically captures this challenge; *"Christ puts the question to all of us; Would you like to be well?"*

We really do not want what we say we want and think we want. Because while Christlikeness at a little distance does attract us, on a nearer view of it we are not so sure.

This, we feel would upset our little comforts, and be something of a bore. So we drop what Christ has just put into our hands and turn back to continue as we are;

Like Augustine, finding again and again to his bewilderment that the life to which he was accustomed held him more than the life for which he really longed.

Selfishness is, no doubt, a disease; yet it does bring us a bigger share of things than we could get without it.

Anger is a childish ailment; but it pays! People give those who are noisy and disagreeable what they want so they will go away.

Do we want to be made whole? In theory, yes. But in reality, when we might gain it, we decide that the accustomed way of things will do." (pg.540-541)

This speaks to a central theme in the book of John, that we are offered life, abundant life, eternal life to be experienced now.

True life is found in Jesus. This man had the opportunity to discover life, to be revitalized in spirit as well as body.

We don't want to give up control of our pleasures - and even some cases our illness - as they become strongholds of control in our lives.

We use them to feel in control, they give us a sense of autonomy - and it is this autonomy we are to trust Jesus with, in order to discover the life God has for us.

Jesus challenges this man's will and says, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk!"

It doesn't say the man asked for healing - Jesus simply speaks a command to get up and walk.

Jesus asks him to do the impossible.

One would think, this man would say, "Hey Einstein, can't you see I'm an invalid, I can't walk! Wait, you already know this! And you ask me to stand up and walk? Is this some kind of a sick joke?"

Yet something surges through this man, a hope which grew into faith - that desire to trust which Jesus had awakened into active faith, the healing power of Jesus rushed into his body and he felt the strength to stand!

Not only to stand, but pick up his mat and walk!

This is not superstition, this is real power.

The power which made Jesus famous, which caused thousands to follow him, the power which he shared with his disciples and hundreds of others throughout history.

This was the power that rocked the empires of the day as those who encountered Christ experienced the power of God flow through them.

In three hundred years Christianity had become the official religion of the Armenian Empire, Aksumite Empire, Roman Empire and had by then spread throughout Asia - not by war but by a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus had awakened something in humanity unlike anything ever seen or experienced before.

It's time for us to reconnect with this - to throw off traditions and religious upbringings which have distorted what real faith is.

It's time to discover what trust in God really is, to look inside, to throw off selfishness, to encounter this power Jesus has available for those who trust in him.

Jesus gift was unsolicited.

The man didn't ask to be healed, there was no overt display of faith in Jesus prompting a response from Jesus or a call to action by Jesus.

Jesus was the initiator and this man was awakened and responded - he gets up, picks up his mat and walks.

Jesus then slips away into the crowd.

As the man was walking from the pool carrying his mat, likely in the vicinity of the Temple, some Jewish leaders see him and chastise him for carrying his mat on the Sabbath.

Understand, the legal and religious culture was intertwined - it was no small matter to be accused of breaking a religious law.

For one who had been an invalid for 38 years, this would have been quite intimidating for him!

"Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath!" they charge him.

"The man who healed me told me to." Was his simple and honest answer.

One would expect there to be great rejoicing, even an enthusiastic inquiry into who this amazing person was - but no, there was none of that, no rejoicing in such a great miracle, only a self-righteous pre-occupation with religious laws!

Instead of celebration, there's accusation - they wanted to find the person who instructed this man to break the Sabbath!

How many times has adherence to some religious law or tradition broken the law of love?

After this intimidating and nerve-racking encounter with the religious leaders, the man is still hanging around the Temple, likely because that was where he had spent the last 38 years.

Jesus comes along and sees him, celebrating and telling everyone about the amazing miracle that just happened!

No, Jesus sees the man troubled, void of the celebration and rejoicing one would expect.

So Jesus comes over to say hello.... No, he comes to encourage him, and give him a solemn warning.

He says in verse 14, *"See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."*

Jesus affirms the miracle and encourages him to take joy in it as he can clearly see something has robbed him of it.

Then Jesus lays down this cryptic warning, *"Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."*

It is implied that whatever sin this man was involved in caused his illness.

We only see two such warnings given by Jesus throughout all four gospels. It's not his modus operandum.

In both cases, the woman caught in adultery and in our story here, the only reason Jesus issues such a warning is because it was directly related to their dire situation.

Remember our message on the woman at the well? Jesus warns her not to do that anymore because she is putting herself in danger and he likely won't be there to protect her in the future like he was that day.

To this man, whatever it was he did or was doing, resulted in his illness, resulting in paralysis.

What did he do in his youth that caused his condition?

Alcoholism? Some form of drugs? A wild lifestyle? We can only speculate.

One thing is for sure, it caused his illness.

We need to be careful with this, because some people have taken this passage to mean all illness is caused by sin.

Jesus specifically refutes that in John 9 where it says, *"As Jesus went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'"*

³ *"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus" (Jn.9:1-3 NIV)*

There was a theology of the day that such illnesses were the result of sin - of the individual or generational.

Some illness is the cause of our actions - unhealthy lifestyle choices.

But not all illness is caused by our actions or sin - some are environmental, genetic, a malfunction in the growth process etc.

Unfortunately for this man, his 38-year long illness was due to something he had done or had been doing, so Jesus lays down a solemn warning.

As they parted ways, once again the man had been chastised.

In this state he returns to the Jewish Leaders to inform them it was Jesus who had healed him.

Sounds like he's being a sell out, a snitch - sounds like he's ungrateful for what Jesus did for him.

Maybe - or perhaps he's just scared and wants to do the right thing!

How many of us have done what those in authority have told us to do because we know we should listen to those in authority?

We don't realize how intimidating those religious leaders were in those days.

They motivated people to obey with fear and guilt. This man was as susceptible to those manipulations as anyone else.

One final point - I love how Jesus sticks it in the face of the religious leaders.

He could have said to the man, 'Get up and walk' but he didn't. He specifically told him to take his mat - knowing, there right by the Temple, he would walk right past the religious leaders.

Jesus knew what he was doing!

Jesus was totally baiting them!

And sure enough they fell for it.

Time and time again, Jesus healed on the Sabbath. It was provocative!

It was to show them how caught up they were in their religiosity and traditions - how they neglected love, how they neglected the needs of the people for their traditions - a false righteousness which they believed pleased God but rather was detestable in God's sight.

If we neglect helping someone because of a religion or tradition, we are not like Christ.

The Sabbath was meant to provide a pause between the weeks of toil, not create a barrier to helping others in need.

It was obvious to see how the Jewish leader's self-righteousness had become priority over genuine care for the people, as they neglected rejoicing in the miracle - they only saw a law being broken.

Do we ever get caught up on traditions?

What traditions or religious expectations you were brought up with do you see inhibiting something good happening?

Did you grow up with a sense of moral superiority? Do you segregate yourself from certain groups or people because you don't approve of their lifestyle? - Then you are not like Jesus.

You are watching for those carrying their mats when they shouldn't, and missing out on the love and power of Jesus.

That power is available for all of us today, to heal us in body and in spirit - and dare I say, our greatest need is in spirit - to die to self and accept the restoration Jesus has for us.

Lay down what you believe you need so badly, trust in Jesus - Get up and walk!

Amen.