JESUS HEALS AN INVALID MAN

John 5:1–15

Key Verse: 5:8

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.’”

“So what’s *your* excuse?” We ask this commonly used question in English when someone hasn’t done something they were supposed to do. We all make excuses for not doing the things we should, right? Sometimes our excuses convince even ourselves! In today’s passage Jesus encounters a man who'd been an invalid for thirty-eight years. Out of his great compassion Jesus wants to heal him and give him a new life. But the man makes many excuses for himself and doesn’t really accept Jesus’ word. Though his body is healed, his soul remains sick. So Jesus finds him and tells him, “Stop sinning.” It shows that Jesus wants to heal us not only physically but also spiritually. It also shows the power of his word. May God help us to hear his voice speaking to us personally.

At the beginning of chapter 4 we saw that Jesus’ new ministry in Judea was growing larger than John the Baptist’s. And the Pharisees noticed. The Pharisees, who were supposed to be the religious leaders of the time, were very sensitive about popularity and position. As they’d come to investigate John the Baptist’s powerful ministry in chapter 1 and shut him down, now they were getting ready to come to discredit Jesus. But Jesus’ ministry was just getting started. Before a conflict with the religious leaders, God wanted to show that Jesus had come to be the Savior of the world (4:42), the one who can help any person from any race or social class, from the top of society to the bottom.

But God also had to keep his promise. God had promised to send his Messiah to the Jews. Now it was God’s time for Jesus to go to them, even though it was going to be so hard. Chapters 5–12, the main part of John’s Gospel, records Jesus’ ministry to the Jews. These eight chapters show us some amazing things about Jesus, but they also show the Jews’ tragic response to him. Sadly, no matter what Jesus says or does, the Jews always respond in unbelief. In all these stories we see a spiritual clash between light and darkness.

Look at verse 1. God had given the Jews three annual feasts to observe: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. God himself had invented these feasts, and he wanted his people to come to his temple in Jerusalem for each feast to remember something important he had done for them. We’re not sure which feast this was, but it doesn’t seem to be Passover. Jesus went to Jerusalem not just to observe the current feast but to proclaim to the Jews who he was.

Look at verse 2. This Sheep Gate was in the city wall at the northeast corner of the city. It was a crowded place (13b) where people came in and out and bought and sold sheep. It was also a place of public bathing. Nearby there were very nice Roman baths. And then there was “Bethesda.” It means “House of Outpouring.” It was just outside the city wall. It was actually two pools next to each other, and each one had a spring in it. The covered colonnades sheltered people from the hot Mideast sun. Look at verse 3. This Bethesda was a place for the “undesirables.” These disabled people were not allowed to enter the temple. They were seen as cursed by God and treated as subhuman. Normal people never bothered with them. But to show who he really is, Jesus again broke with social conventions and went to this tragic place, Bethesda.

Look at verse 3 again. These people had many problems: some were blind; some were lame; some were paralyzed. They were all so sad! According to the footnote and verse 7, they were waiting by this pool because they believed that whenever the waters were stirred by an angel, the first one in could be healed of whatever disease they had. Each person there had a vague hope that somehow they might get lucky. While they were waiting by the pool, they might have sympathized with each other and tried to help each other as best they could. But whenever the waters were stirred, they all started pushing and shoving in a cutthroat competition. This scene at Bethesda is a caricature of humanity in all its longing and pathos. We still would like to think that we would help some other suffering person around us. But underneath, we all think our own problem is more serious, and at the crucial moment, we tend to take care of ourselves first. Many great authors like Leo Tolstoy, Alexander Dumas and Jane Austen agonized over this humanist dilemma in their novels, but could find no solution.

Look at verse 5. This man was an invalid. As an invalid he had to lie down on a mat all the time; he couldn’t walk. He needed constant assistance. The author repeats that he’d been an invalid for thirty-eight years. We don’t know if his condition was congenital or if it resulted from injury or illness. In any case, thirty-eight years is a really long time. He may’ve been one of the worst cases there. He must’ve given up on himself long ago. Now he was just maintaining his life in despair, waiting by this pool but without any real hope to get better. He was alive physically, but he was already like a dead man.

Read verse 6. Of all the people lying there, Jesus decided to speak with *this* man. It shows that Jesus is the God of mercy and the God of hope. Today so many people still have deep life problems with no solutions, and they feel so hopeless. But Jesus came to heal our diseases, especially our chronic spiritual ones. In Jesus there’s no fatalism. Jesus is the true hope for all hopeless people.

Read verse 6 again. At first Jesus’ question is surprising. Why would anyone *not* want to get well? But actually, many people are *afraid* of getting better. They’re *used to* the help they receive. They’re afraid that if they’re healed, they’ll have to *work*. And they’re used to receiving *sympathy*. Their problem gets them lots of attention. When he saw this man, Jesus immediately perceived that he’d lost the *desire* to get better. So he asked him graciously, “Do you want to get well?” It was the best way of helping him. All the knowledge and effort in the world couldn’t help him if he himself had no *desire* to get well. Our situations may not be as severe as his, but we each have our own chronic problems that make us give up. Today Jesus is asking us personally, “Do you want to get well?”

How did the man respond? Look at verse 7. He complained. He said nobody wanted to help him. He said he couldn't compete with others. Actually, he didn’t really answer the question. He expected help, made excuses, complained, and blamed others. It shows his spiritual sickness. God made all human beings in his own image to be responsible creatures. But always expecting help, making excuses, complaining and blaming makes us spiritual paralytics. It all starts when we don’t take responsibility for ourselves. Even physically very healthy people can be spiritually paralyzed.

How did Jesus help this man? Read verse 8. Jesus didn’t sympathize with him at all. And he refused to accept his complaining and blaming. Jesus said, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk” (8). He challenged him to take responsibility for his life and live by God’s truth. It’s not God’s truth to always be expecting help or lying down helplessly, complaining and blaming. God’s truth is to work hard and do something good with our lives for his glory. We can’t blame our situation; we need faith. God doesn’t want us to despair or give up. He wants us to overcome ourselves and our situations and live fruitful lives for his glory.

So many things in our lives can make us feel overwhelmed and hopeless. We have our responsibilities as students, as employees, as spouses and parents, as homeowners, as citizens. On top of all this, we also have the responsibilities of ministry. Sometimes the people around us may not be very supportive or helpful. We can excuse ourselves and think we have some valid reasons. But Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” When we sit around complaining or blaming others, not doing what we should, we become ugly and burdensome. We each need to accept Jesus’ rebuke: “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”

What happened? Look at verse 9a. At the command of Jesus, at once this chronic, hopeless man was healed. It demonstrated the life-giving power of Jesus’ word. Jesus’ word still can heal even the most chronic diseases. Even one word of Jesus can completely transform us if we really accept it. When we try to help people, we tend to focus on their problems and get overwhelmed. Human advice can’t really help. We need to believe that the word of Jesus has life-giving power in it. Even one word of Jesus can really heal people.

What happened after Jesus had mercifully healed this man? Look at verses 9b–10. The Jews saw the man walking around, carrying his mat. It was amazing. But they couldn’t see God’s wonderful grace in his life. All they could see was that it was the Sabbath. Their legalistic thinking made them narrow-minded, and a different kind of spiritual paralytic.

How did the man respond? Look at verse 11. He was scared, so he blamed Jesus for making him a lawbreaker. He didn’t want to take responsibility. As a former paralytic, he had a *habit* of blaming others. The Jews said, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?” But the man who was healed had no idea who it was. Jesus had already slipped away into the crowd that was there (12,13). It’s surprising he had no idea who had healed him. His life-long illness was cured, but he didn’t even go to the trouble to find out who helped him. He just took the healing and left. Sometimes we treat God like this, too. We want his help when we need it, but then have no real interest in getting to know him.

Jesus didn’t leave this man alone; like a good shepherd he went after him. He went to the temple courts, where the man could go, now that he was healed. There Jesus found him and gave him a strong rebuke: “Stop sinning” (14). How was the man sinning? He wasn’t at a bad place in town; he was at the temple courts—in modern terms, at church! But Jesus saw he was sinning in his heart. What sin was he committing? It was ingratitude. He wasn’t thankful for his healing. Romans 1:21 says that ingratitude is the root of all sin. It’s our sinful nature not to appreciate what was done for us. Ingratitude may not seem serious, but it’s a sin against God. We all need to thank God, as well as all those who’ve helped us. According to Jesus, when we’re not thankful, we’re sinning. How can we be so thankful? Whatever our situation, we need to remember God’s grace to us in Jesus. When we were sinful, Jesus gave his life for us. Becoming a Christian means experiencing this grace. Then, in Christian life our struggle is to remember this grace always. Look at verse 15. The man didn’t accept Jesus’ rebuke; his pride was offended, and he reported Jesus to the authorities.

This third miraculous sign shows that Jesus’ word has the power to heal the most hopeless people, both physically and spiritually. May God help us to accept his words: “Do you want to get well?” “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” “Stop sinning.” May God help us not to make excuses but to use our lives to do many good things for his glory, full of thanks to him.