

John's Gospel - a Victim of Self-Help

by John Vissers

The sermon explores the healing of the invalid at Bethesda, emphasizing the need for divine intervention over self-reliance and the transformative power of faith in Christ.

Duration: 32:36

Scripture: John 5:1-11, John 5:14, John 5:17, John 5:19, John 5:24, John 5:39

Topics: "Gospel Of John"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that there are various options people often choose when faced with problems in life. These options include relying on superstitions, blaming others, trying harder, or waiting for the perfect opportunity. However, the speaker highlights that the true option Scripture offers is to look to Jesus and hear His Word. Jesus shows compassion and heals a man who had been waiting by a pool for years, unable to help himself. The speaker emphasizes that human beings are in a spiritual crisis and cannot save themselves, but need Jesus to intervene.

Transcript

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, and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie, the blind, the lame, the paralyzed.

One who was there had been an invalid for 38 years. 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? 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.

Then Jesus said to him, get up, pick up your mat, and walk. At once the man was cured. He picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, it is the Sabbath, the law forbids you to carry your mat. But he replied, the man who made me well said to me, pick up your mat and walk. And so they asked him, who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk? The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

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. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

Amen, and may God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. We're going to focus really on the first part of this passage tonight, and let's pray together as we approach this passage. Lord, we thank you for the privilege which is ours of worshipping you.

We thank you tonight for your written word, the Bible, through which you speak to your people. And we pray tonight in these moments together as we study your word, as we prepare to come to your table, that indeed you would speak to us the word that you would have us hear. That you would take that word and apply it in our own hearts and in our minds and in our lives.

Lord, you know our needs this night, you know who we are, and we pray that you would speak to us through your word, by your spirit. In the name of Christ we ask it. Amen.

A few years ago I had the privilege of going to teach in Bangalore, India at the South Asia Institute for Advanced Christian Studies for a couple of weeks to give some lectures there on the history of theology. And in order to get there I flew into the International Airport in Bombay, and then I had to transfer to a domestic flight in order to catch the plane on Indian Airlines which would take me into Bangalore. The problem was that I also had to change airports in Bombay because the National Airport is in another part of the city from the International Airport.

And this meant that I had to collect my bags and find a taxi to take me from the International Airport across the city to the National Airport so that I could catch this flight into Bangalore and be met there by those who were greeting me and get settled in there. Well as soon as I stepped out of the airport, and you need to understand this was my first visit to India, I was literally mobbed by people. I thought at first that someone had sent a greeting party to meet me or perhaps they had mistaken me for someone famous, but in fact what I discovered soon is that they were taxi drivers, that they were bus drivers who wanted me to hire them to take me across to the National Airport, and that there were people selling all sorts of things and that there were also beggars there, women and children and disabled people, all begging for money.

Everyone it seemed wanted a piece of me and I found the experience rather overwhelming, never having faced anything like that before in my life. Fortunately I was able to negotiate my way through the crowd and found someone to take me to the National Airport and then finally made my way to Bangalore. But if you've ever been in that kind of a situation, and those of you perhaps who have traveled in other parts of the world have faced that kind of situation, if you've ever experienced that kind of a reality then you know what Jesus faced as he entered Jerusalem in John chapter 5 in our passage this evening.

The passage tells the story of the second visit of Jesus to Jerusalem, and the precise time of this visit is not given except to say that it was during one of the Jewish feasts. We're not told which one, but it was during one of the Jewish feasts and all kinds of people would have been gathering in the city. And the story is described with a great deal of detail almost so that it feels like we are there ourselves.

Jesus enters into Jerusalem through the Sheep Gate, through the entrance that is called the Sheep Gate. Now this is in the northeast part of the city, near the northeast section of the temple, and it was called the Sheep Gate because that's the way the animals were brought into the city and brought into the temple for the sacrifices. And we're told that near this Sheep Gate, as Jesus made his way into the city, he would

have seen a pool which was there.

A pool which was surrounded, it says, by five covered colonnades. And around this pool there were all kinds of people. Disabled people, the blind, the lame, it says, and the paralyzed.

And many of them, no doubt, would have been begging from people as they made their way into the city. As people made their way into Jerusalem for the feast, they would have been asking for help. They would have been asking for money.

They would have been asking in some way to receive some kind of help from those who were passing by. Some of them probably were just there out of habit. They had nowhere else to go.

And this was the place where they spent each and every day of their lives. Some of them were there around that pool looking for a miracle. Other translations of this passage, which are based on later manuscripts, describe how the people were waiting for the moving of the waters.

It says, from time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir the waters. And the first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease he had. And so this was the situation that Jesus came into as he made his way into Jerusalem, as he came through the Sheep Gate, as he saw this pool, as he saw all of these peoples, as he saw the busyness and all that was taking place as he made his way into Jerusalem for the feast.

Now for some reason, and we're not told the reason, but for some reason one man in particular caught the eye of Jesus. Perhaps he had done something to get the attention of Jesus. Or perhaps Jesus saw him there and simply took pity on him.

And Jesus learned that he had been in this condition for a long time. And what follows then, the conversation is really rather remarkable because Jesus asks him, do you want to get well? The man responds by saying that he has no one to help him get into the pool when the water is stirred. Someone else always gets there first.

And Jesus says, get up, pick up your mat, and walk. And it says the man was cured at once. He picked up his mat and he walked.

He finds health. He finds a cure. He finds new life.

And then of course the rest of the story unfolds in terms of the conversation with the Jewish leaders and then his encounter with Jesus later again at the temple. But it's the first part of this story that I want us to focus on very briefly tonight as we prepare ourselves to come to the Lord's table and as we consider what this healing, the healing of this man at the pool, is really all about and what it says to us in terms of our lives and in terms of our faith and in terms of what it means for us to hear Jesus' word and follow him and obey him and his touch in our lives. Now, the first thing that I want us to notice, and I find this very interesting, Jesus asks this man if he wants to be well.

He asks this man beside the pool whether he wants to be cured, whether he wants to be healed. Now, we need to understand that this was a man with a great need. The text says that he had been an invalid for 38 years.

He had been disabled. Now, this could mean a number of things. It could mean that he was 38 years old and, in fact, he had been disabled from birth, that he had never known any other life but the kind of life that he lived as an invalid, the kind of life he lived as a disabled person.

It could mean that he was much older than that and that he'd been in this condition for some 38 years, that through some disease or through some accident, through some illness, through some tragedy in his life, he had become disabled and now had experienced that disability, that condition, for some 38 years. It might even mean that he had actually been there by the pool for 38 years, day in and day out, waiting to be cured, waiting to be healed. Whatever the situation, what we see here is a sobering picture because this is a man who is the picture of someone with a long, lingering need.

And perhaps it was for this reason that Jesus took notice of him, that Jesus focused on him, that Jesus took pity on him. And Jesus asks him, do you want to be well? Do you want to be cured? Do you want to be healed? Now, this seems, I think, from any perspective, like a rather odd question. I mean, after all, this man had been an invalid, had been disabled for 38 years.

His life, no doubt, would have been miserable because in the first century, there were no social support systems as we have today for those who found themselves in this situation. And no doubt, he would have been doomed to a life of poverty, a life of begging. He would have been doomed to a life on the margins, wondering whether, in fact, he would be able to eke out an existence at all.

And so, the answer to Jesus' question seems obvious. Of course, he wants to be well. I mean, how could he want anything else? But, of course, the question goes a bit deeper than that.

Because does he really want to be well? Perhaps Jesus knew that he had given up any hope of ever being healed, that he was just so discouraged and so depressed that he never thought he'd ever be healed. Or perhaps Jesus knew that this man had become so accustomed to his situation that he didn't really see the need for any help. Perhaps, in a strange sort of a way, he had actually become used to his situation and, in fact, was quite contented with the life that he had.

He was able to get by. He knew no other life. He did not know what it would be like to live in a different way.

If he was cured, his whole way of life might be different. And so, the routine of his life may well have been jeopardized. We don't know for sure, but it's an odd question.

Jesus says, do you want to be well? I think we need to understand, as we reflect on this passage, that there are many people who struggle with many kinds of different and deep needs over long periods of time. Some struggle with things that cast a long shadow over the entire landscape of their lives. It might well be a physical disability.

It might well be some sort of disease. It might well be some emotional distress that haunts us. It might be the result of an abusive relationship of the past.

Most of us, dare I say, all of us, suffer from the hurts of the past and carry them forward and they become burdens to us. They hold us in bondage and indeed often paralyze us. And it's often these things that Jesus notices first.

He noticed it in this man by the pool, and he notices it in our lives. But just as Jesus asks this man, do you want to get well? It seems to me that Jesus always and often asks us the same question. Do we really want to get well? Do we really want to get out from underneath that which burdens us, that which haunts us? Because you see, the awful reality of our lives and the awful reality of sin in our lives is that we grow accustomed to it.

And allowing Christ into our lives is a threat. Because if we let Jesus in, indeed, he might change us. He might heal us.

He might turn our lives around. And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we're not always so sure that is what we want. Most of us want Jesus to do something for us, yes, but we don't want Him to change our lives.

Not really. Not in a deep, meaningful way. Because then it's not going to work.

It's not going to work. And then it may require repentance. Then it may require a real change on our part.

Then it may require hard decisions about the way we live. Our lives will never be the same again. Do we really want to get well? Do we really want Jesus to deliver us? That's the first question that I want to put before you as we prepare ourselves to come to the Lord's table tonight.

Do we really want to get out from under the burden of sin and self or whatever other burdens we are carrying tonight? Do we really want to be well? The second thing that I want us to notice about this passage is that the man in his response to Jesus complains about his situation. It is difficult to read verse 7 without seeing in it a great deal of self-pity. I hope none of you will take this to be a political statement.

It's not intended that way. One of the things that annoyed me a great deal about the election campaign for the mayor of Toronto last November was that it seemed to me that both of the leading candidates seemed to whine a great deal. Mel Lastman may well have won the election because he was better at whining than Barbara Hall.

I heard them in a debate on the radio on CFRB and I had to turn it off. I found it just so it was too much for my nerves to take. And in a very real sense that's what happens here.

The man beside the pool starts to whine at Jesus. You know I'd be well by now but I have no one to help me get into the pool when the water is stirred. And while I'm trying to get in someone always beats me to it.

He begins to complain to Jesus. He begins to describe his situation. He sees himself as a victim.

And notice there are at least three things that I want you to notice about his response that are very important. The first is that he assumes of course that he has to help himself. He assumes that he has to get himself down into that pool in order to be cured.

He assumes that he has to save himself. I want to come back to that in a minute. Secondly, when he can't help himself, when he can't get down into the pool himself, and when others won't help him, then he sees himself as a victim.

In other words he says to Jesus, of course I want to get well but I'll never get well at this rate. It's not fair. Everyone beats me into the pool.

No one will help me. And so he sees himself as a victim. It's somebody else's fault that he's not well.

And then thirdly, he assumes that the pool holds the only cure for his problem, for his predicament. That if somehow he doesn't get down into that pool either on his own strength or by someone helping him, that he'll never be well again. And I want to suggest to you tonight that in a very powerful and in a very profound way, this is a paradigm of our generation.

Because most of us live with the idea that we have to save ourselves. Not only that we have to save ourselves, but that we can save ourselves. And in fact we have built a whole culture in this country and on this continent and in the Western world on this premise.

Our bookstores are filled with self-help books on the seven steps to happiness or the twelve steps to self-fulfillment or whatever it is that you want to pursue. And we teach our children that if they just try a little harder, if they just grit their teeth a little more, they'll be able to do whatever they want. They can get out from underneath it themselves.

And the fact of the matter is, if we're honest with ourselves, it's nonsense. It's nonsense in many spheres of life, but it's certainly nonsense in things of the Spirit. Because the reality is that this man could not help himself.

He needed Jesus. And that's the situation in which we all find ourselves. The Apostle Paul makes this abundantly clear in the opening chapters of Romans.

The first three chapters of Romans are Paul's attempt to set the record straight that human beings find themselves in a spiritual crisis out from which they cannot get themselves. No matter how hard they try, whether it's through obedience to the law, whether it's through trying harder, whatever it is, you cannot save yourself. We are in a crisis.

And the crisis demands, the Apostle Paul says, a Savior who comes to die on a cross to do what we cannot do for ourselves. That is, save us. And so in a very real sense, the Gospel makes it very clear that we cannot save ourselves.

That's what God's amazing grace is all about. But it doesn't end there, of course, in our culture, because when we realize that we can't find fulfillment ourselves, when we realize that we can't save ourselves, that we can't ultimately help ourselves, what happens is then we see ourselves as victims. It is somebody else's fault.

In a recent book, Oz Guinness has written about the victim mentality of our culture. We live, he says, with the idea that we have been more victimized than others. Our therapeutic culture has taught us to lay the blame for our problems on others.

We don't get a promotion because the boss hates us or because a colleague has stabbed us in the back. We have abandoned personal responsibility, he writes. We blame our parents, our leaders, our spouses, our children, anyone and everyone else.

There's a wonderful song, a satire, satirized song by Anna Russell, who satirized this attitude in the conclusion of her song called Psychiatric Folk Song. She writes these words, at three, I had a feeling of ambivalence toward my brothers, and so it follows naturally I poisoned all my lovers, but now I'm happy I've learned the lesson this is taught that everything I do that's wrong is someone else's fault. Well, that's

the reality of the world that we live in, isn't it? The gospel cuts across and challenges us with the amazing grace of God in that kind of a circumstance because the kind of culture in which we live teaches us somehow that we have to save ourselves and then when we can't save ourselves, of course, then we see ourselves as victims and God in his grace reaches down into our lives and cuts through all of that and says it's by grace you are saved through faith and not of yourselves.

It is a gift of God so that no one should boast. We are in a crisis and we cannot save ourselves. And then finally notice that Jesus heals the man in verses eight and nine.

I suppose that Jesus could have responded in any number of ways. He could have given the man a lecture, I suppose, on the silliness of the superstition that he believed in. Did he really think he'd be healed by being the first one into the pool? He could have told the man to stop his whining, to put an end to the self-pity and get on with his life.

He could have performed some spectacular miracle with a great deal of fanfare, but what does Jesus do in a very simple but in a very profound moment? He says to the man, pick up your mat and walk. Get up, pick up your mat and walk. It's a simple command, a simple command from the Word of Jesus.

Jesus knows this man can't help himself. He has pity for him. Jesus knows that others are not about to help him either.

He knows the kind of cutthroat atmosphere in which this man is living his existence and there's no way anyone else is going to help him. And Jesus knows that ultimately the pool is not going to provide the cure that he needs. Jesus knows that it's only his Word that's going to change that man's life forever.

But you'll notice that he heals the man in a way that involves his response. And that's the beautiful thing about the Gospel, because as the Gospel comes, it enables us, it empowers us then to respond to the Word of Jesus. There is obedience to the Word of Jesus.

Jesus speaks, but the man has to get up. He has to pick up his mat. He has to walk.

This is not self-help now. He's not kind of getting himself up on his own strength, but in obedience to the Word of Jesus. He gets up and he walks.

And the man is healed and given a new life because of the Word of Jesus. But now, in response, he has to get up. He has to walk.

He has to pick up his mat. He has to live in the fullness of the life that Jesus has given him. And what I want us to see here is that we have here a paradigm of the Gospel.

The message of the Gospel is set forth clearly in this miracle. This man cannot help himself. His friends cannot help him.

The crisis of his life requires a deliverance that only Jesus can provide. But having provided it, he must now get up. He must now own the words of Jesus as his own words.

He must pick up his mat and walk. And as Jesus tells him later, he must stop sinning and live a new life. You see, no matter how hard we try, the hard reality is that we cannot get out from under the crisis of sin in our lives on our own strength.

We can't get out from under the burdens that weigh us down on our own strength. We can't pick up our mats and walk and get up to our own feet in our own strength and in our own power, not spiritually speaking. No matter how much our family and our friends may love us, they can't save us.

No matter how hard we may want to try, we cannot save ourselves. Only Jesus can do it. And that's the Gospel which cuts across the grain of our culture.

And it's the Gospel which cuts across the grain of everything within us that says, no, somehow I must be able to save myself. Somehow I must be able to make myself well. The reality is that you come to that moment of faith when you realize that that's the reason Jesus has come to do for us what we can never do for ourselves.

What changes need to be made in your life tonight? Where are the places where you need to be healed? What are the burdens that need to be lifted from you? Jesus stands before us tonight and he says, you can wait beside some magical pool, I suppose, and it superstitions with the hope that someday your life will be different. That's one option. You can blame your problem on others.

That's another option. You can put your chin forward and up and try a little harder. That's another option.

You can waste your time in waiting for just the right opportunity and just the right break to capitalize on it. That's another option. Or there is the option which Scripture holds out for us.

Jesus says, you can look to me. You can hear my word because I have noticed your need. I have noticed your predicament.

I know the burdens that you carry and I look at you and I take pity on you. Get up, pick up your mat, and walk. This, my friends, is the gospel of Christ and this is the gospel that we celebrate and share as we come to this table tonight.

Let's pray together. Lord, we confess that in many ways this is a hard message for us to accept and to understand because it calls into question all those things that we value in the world. And everything within us says, Lord, that somehow we should be able to save ourselves, that somehow we should be able to measure up, that somehow we should be able to do something that would overcome the crisis of our lives and sin.

But the hard reality tonight, Lord, is we acknowledge that it's not so. That we need your grace, your amazing grace in our lives. That we need Jesus to come in and do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And so tonight, Lord, whatever our circumstance and situation, we come to you and pray that as we move to the Lord's table that you would speak to us and minister to us by your grace. For we ask it in the precious name of Christ our Savior. Amen.

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