

Pool At Bethesda

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[0 : 00] You are the eternal God of all time and eternity, and that we are very temporal creatures that have our three score years and ten and then a little, and we need very much in those years to come to know you as you have come to create and to know us.

And to redeem us through your Son, Jesus Christ. We thank you that you have given us your word, and that you've given us the capacity to hear and to understand and to obey it.

And we ask that as we listen today, we might do all those things, that we might hear, that we may understand, and that we may be given grace to obey. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. The story, which is from John chapter 5, verses 1 to 18, reads as follows.

I hope you've all heard this lots of times, I'm sure, but nevertheless, listen again and see how you get along. After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

[1 : 30] Now there is in Jerusalem, by the sheep gate, a pool, in Hebrew called Bethesda, or Bethesda, as it's sometimes translated, which has five porticos.

One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years.

When Jesus saw him and knew that he had been lying there a long time, he said to him, Do you want to be healed? The sick man answered him, Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled, and while I am going down, another steps down before me.

Jesus said to him, Rise, take up your pallet, and walk. And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked.

Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who was cured, It is the Sabbath. It is not lawful for you to carry your pallet.

[2 : 44] But he answered them, The man who healed me said to me, Take up your pallet and walk. They asked him, Who is this man who said to you, Take up your pallet and walk?

Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, See, you are well.

Now sin no more, that nothing worse befall you. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

And this was why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the Sabbath day. But Jesus answered them, My father is working still, and I am working.

This was why the Jews sought all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath, but also called God his own father, making himself equal with God.

[3 : 51] Well, the first thing I'd like you to tell you is, as I've suggested to you here, is to tell you about sin.

And this story is to portray the nature of sin. Sin is portrayed as a paralysis, something that renders you incapable of moving.

Not physical paralysis necessarily, but the kind of mental and emotional and motivational paralysis that makes it impossible for you to do anything.

You are, you're caught and incapable of doing anything. Sin is also portrayed here as endless waiting.

Waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting and nothing ever coming. This man had been waiting for 38 years.

[5 : 06] Sin has a further effect on you in that it tends to atrophy you. That is, you know when a bone has been in a cast for some time, then it no longer works anymore.

Sin has been paralyzed in its effect on us means that we no longer have the capacity to do anything because we are atrophied by the effect of sin.

One of the worst things that sin does is that it hinders us from seeking its cure. In other words, if you were caught in the process of sin, you tend to think that that's the end, that there is no hope, there's nothing beyond it, there's no way you can deal with it, that it's just there and you can't cope with it.

And so this man was caught in the particular problem of having given up, so that when Jesus said to him, do you want to be healed?

He said, what's the use? I've been here and whenever the waters are stirred, I have nobody to help me into the water so that there's no chance of my ever finding a cure to my condition.

[6 : 35] Sin also produces a lottery mentality. Now what I mean by a lottery mentality is that week after week, you put your money on the line.

And week after week, you look at your ticket when the announcements come out and you tear it up and say, it hasn't worked. Next week, you put your money on the line.

Next week, you're disappointed. Next week, you put your money on the line. Next week, you're disappointed. Now, the idea is that one day you'll get the big break. But statistically, as you may know, very few people ever get the big break.

Though many people spend a lot of their money and a lot of their lives waiting for the big break that never comes. That they have this idea that somewhere, somewhere at some time in life, they're going to get the big break, the thing that's going to mean it.

Everything will come into order and life will be as it should and everything will happen as it should. And they waste the whole of their lives waiting for the great break that never happens.

[7 : 47] And that was what this man was doing. He was waiting for the big break that never came.

So this thing of paralysis, endless waiting, atrophy, the incapacity to seek the cure of the illness is part of the illness.

And then this lottery mentality. And it happens to individual people as it happened to this individual man. It also happens to companies.

It happens to congregations. It happens to countries. So that a country like ours is suffering very much from the total accumulated impact of what you could call sin.

We don't know what to do. We don't believe there's any possible answer. We are in despair. Nobody's willing to take leadership. Nobody's willing to take blame.

[8 : 51] Nobody's willing to take responsibility. Nobody is willing to do anything. And that's how sin affects individuals. It affects groups of people.

It affects countries. So that the ultimate sin, the unforgivable sin, is despair. Despair takes hold of you and despair breeds despair, breeds despair.

And that's how you find yourself, characterized by a mentality of despair and hopelessness.

Now, that's why sin is, in fact, a dreadful reality. It's dreadful because of the impact it has.

We need to learn not to mock sin, not even to make fun of sin.

[10 : 03] What we need to learn is to hate it because of the dreadful impact it has on people's lives. We need to hate sin as a terrible and vicious disease.

Now, a lot of people feel that sin is the thing, you know, that... You get people making fun of sin by saying, you know, it's so much fun, it must be sin.

Well, sin isn't something really to be made fun of because of the suffering that it causes to people on a consistent basis.

You don't make fun of a man who, for 38 years, has dealt with a disease over which he... which has just completely immobilized. He hasn't been able to do anything.

He hasn't been able to break out of it. You don't make fun of that. You know, you may think that sin is... is some slight personal departure from the best standards of moral behavior.

[11 : 10] But it's far, far worse than that. And it's far, far more damaging than that. And it needs a far more profound cure than anything that we know about or that we have resources to on our own.

We can't deal with it. You see, part of... part of our... part of the problem, I think, of our New Age society is that we think that we can accommodate sin.

We think that we can... we can accommodate uninhibited sexuality in spite of the dreadful consequences in many, many parts of the world, including our own.

We think that... I mean, when you deal with people like high school students and teach them sex education, you just make the assumption that there's no use teaching them how to behave.

All you've got to do is know how they behave and prepare them accordingly so that there is no sense that you can fight against the problem or that you can overcome the problem.

[12 : 26] And that's the sort of brave, new society that we're in. we think we have the capacity to deal with the dread disease of sin which separates people from people, which isolates, which cuts us off from God and cuts us off from all that God intended for our lives.

And we think we can accommodate that on our own, and we can't. And so it's a dreadful thing. And the picture of it is this man who for 38 years was without hope.

In the course of that, he came to the place where he had, there is nobody to help me. In other words, he was totally isolated by it. Nobody took an interest in him.

Nobody had any relationship to him any longer. No one was there with him. He was incapable of taking any initiative to help himself.

He conceded. He was convinced of the impossibility of his own situation and avoided by everybody else. Now, if you think sin is a lovely thing, then you make that man into a lovely person.

[13 : 42] If you think sin is exciting and dangerous and the way to live, well, look at that man and you will see what sin is as it's understood in the New Testament.

It was one of the Good Friday talks that was given at the church by Marian Maxwell. She pointed out, she said, one of the things that I have observed as she was thinking about Isaiah 53, she said, if you don't take sin seriously, you don't take Christ seriously.

And because if sin isn't serious, then Christ was silly to get involved in dying on a cross, unless there was something dreadful that had to be confronted and had to be dealt with.

And so you get this very powerful picture of sin. What happens in this situation, then, is that Jesus comes along and takes the initiative.

If you look at the story, verse six of the passage we're reading, when Jesus saw him, knew that he'd been lying there a long time, he said to him, do you want to be healed?

[15 : 00] If you look further down in the story, in verse 14, afterward, Jesus found him. He didn't find Jesus.

Jesus found him. You know, that's one of the, I mean, it's a lovely picture of how Jesus goes after us. You know, that most of us, our religion consists in deliberately running away from Christ.

That's how we, that's how we use religion very often, to run away from Christ. And to, and, but Jesus takes the initiative, finds this man in his, the hopelessness of his despairing situation and says to him, do you want to be healed?

And of course, that's, that's the, that's a terribly important question. it, it, it, it, it's sort of like saying to, saying to a person, what do you think the big break would look like for you?

You know, what, what is the thing that, that would make a real difference to you in your life right now? What, what is the thing that, that, that you, that could happen to you?

[16 : 21] When he says, do you want to be healed? Remember, he's talking to a man who's incapable of believing that there's any possibility of ever being healed. And he's talking to a man who's long since given up any hope.

But he nevertheless asks him this question to see if there is in him any capacity on which he can respond and say, in this situation, this is the healing that I want.

And so he asks him, do you want to be healed? The, the, the pool, remember that, that what, what you have in this story is a, is a pool of water.

And, and these people are gathered around or lying around this pool. remember there are five porticos around the pool and the people are gathered and here is, here is a pool of water and you know that, that the, the picture is that at some point an angel comes down and stirs the water and the first person into the water after it's been stirred gets healed.

now that's, I don't think that, that's, I don't, I don't know how to think of that because it's, it doesn't say anything about it in the, in the story here.

[17 : 52] It doesn't say, it doesn't mention anybody who ever has been healed there and, it sort of fits in with the general human concept of religion, that religion is an endless waiting for something that might happen that might bring benefit.

And that becomes the basis of a lot of human superstition too. That, that if you, if you wait long enough and patiently enough, something may someday happen which will change your mind, which will change your life.

And, you know, that a lot of churches are quite like this. There are places around which people are gathered waiting for something to happen that never happens. And finally people get tired and move off because, because they, the thing they hoped for never happens.

Well, that's, that is, almost heightens the picture of despair. I think it's, you know, that in our society we've made the great new discovery that if you believe something strong enough it must be true.

And, I think that was what was being illustrated here that these people believed it because they had nothing else to believe. They had no other hope. so that the, the very sort of thin thread of superstition that led to this miracle of healing that was supposed to take place when the waters were disturbed kept them there in the hope that something might happen.

[19 : 18] But nothing ever did until one day Jesus Christ came along ignoring the pool of water. He addressed one man and said to him, do you want to be healed? He picked out one man from the crowd.

Now some of you may wonder why he picked out one man when there was a whole lot of people there and, a lot of people that need healing and I don't know what the answer to that is.

Except, except that the, I have this sort of theory about it which I'd like to share with you in case it makes any sense to you.

if you have the crowd of people standing here and these, these are all people standing there and there they are you see there's ones they're just like peas in a pod there's, one is no different from the other you see.

Then you pick one over here and he's somewhat set apart. Now what Christ does is he goes into a crowd of people and in order to do what he wants to do he sets one apart.

[20 : 31] In this case he set apart the man who had been there for 38 years. One of the perhaps more tragic cases among all that were there. He picks that one and he deals with that one and he deals with that person in a way that his life is completely transformed.

Well I think what we do in our society is we take even the exceptional people and put them in here so that they are hidden.

So that they're just another human being. What we do is hide people in the crowd what Jesus does is pull them out of the crowd and identify them. And the result of doing this you see if I could point out to you what Christ is doing here is not getting the whole crowd to look at him at this one person but getting the whole crowd to look at Christ himself.

Who is he that did this to this man? And the hope for these people is in turning to him not in being amazed at him.

And yet when we read the story the difficulty we have is that we call it the pool of Bethesda and the pool of Bethesda had nothing to do with it because it didn't accomplish anything in the story.

[21 : 55] It was probably a semi-sewer anyway and the thought is that one of the commentators one of the ancient commentators said that they thought that the reason it was considered to have healing impact is because when they slaughtered the lambs for sacrifice their blood ran into the pool and gave the waters curative powers.

But so Jesus doesn't deal with this. What he does predominantly is to deal with one person but so as to turn everybody in their thinking including this assembly here today not to look at the person that was healed with whom we can identify but to look to the person who healed him the person who picked out the individual and the God whom I am convinced deals with us as individuals.

he is able to do that. He seems to have been able to create us so that we're all uniquely different from one another and he seems to be able to deal with us in an individual basis so that when I come to him with my situation he can hear and heal me in my situation.

He doesn't want me to become a kind of ecclesiastical clone that looks like everybody else in the church. He deals with me in all the peculiarity of my situation whether I'm rich or poor well or sick whether I'm great or humble whatever he's able to deal with me in my situation and that's I think one of the amazing things about the New Testament which we tend to overlook what we do is we take a whole class of people like unmarried pregnant girls or people with AIDS or some other group of people and we try to deal with them as a group and the government tries to provide for them as a group and they line them all up in groups what Jesus consistently did was to take the person out of the group and say

I want to deal with you as an individual and so he picks this man out of the crowd and he says do you want to be healed and he wants to get a personal and individual response from the heart of an individual person and I think that that's part of what's happening in this story here he is sitting beside this pool locked in with a whole lot of others like himself and Jesus singles him out and deals with him as it is his purpose to do with everyone what Jesus does to him is to say when Jesus says do you want to be healed and the man gives his despair I have lots of people who come in to see me to ask what they should do about their problem whatever their problem might be and after

[25 : 34] I've sat and talked to them for half an hour I realize I hope I'm not being cynical in this but I occasionally realize that what in fact they're doing is coming to prove to themselves that even I can't help them and that they are probably more threatened by the possibility that I can than by the quiet assurance that I can't and therefore their situation is hopeless and their despair is justified and their cynicism about religion is probably warranted they're sure of that and that's in a sense the kind of answer that Jesus got from this man when he said well when the pool is stirred there's nobody to put me into it anyway so that despair Jesus deals with by turning to the man and saying to him rise take up your pallet and walk now let me say to you that

Jesus what Jesus asks him to do is quite impossible he can't do it he cannot rise he cannot take up his pallet he cannot walk he has been sick paralyzed atrophied 38 years he can't possibly do what Jesus asks him to do and yet Jesus consistently says last week we talked about the nobleman and his son remember and he said go your son lives well there was nothing whatever to give the father any reassurance that that in fact had happened and he had to walk away trying to do what what Jesus told him to do without any assurance that anything had happened and it was only the next day that he discovered that his son the fever had left him at that hour remember

Jesus picked out the man in the synagogue whose hand whose hand was crippled paralyzed and he said to him stretch out your hand you know which the man hadn't been able to do for years and years and the man stretched out his hand and it was made whole like the other were told he said he said to the woman who for many years had been bent over with some kind of spinal condition so she couldn't even lift up her head and he told her to straighten up which was a hopeless thing to do humanly speaking but that was the kind of thing that Jesus asked people to do the difference is that when Jesus asks you to do something he empowers you to do it he enables you to do it and so it comes out of your relationship to him when this man was told to rise take up his bed and walk he did it because

Jesus enabled him to do it well I know that the question comes around is that you have to look out and see who this man Jesus is the one who comes to the man he singles out the man he questions the man he heals the man with a word he empowers him to stand up and walk and then in verse 14 he goes and finds the man and he commands him to sin no more you see where it says that down there in verse 14 see you are well sin no more that nothing worse befall you now what I think happens in a very practical way and I I that something takes place where somebody in faith takes a promise given by

Christ and nobody else could give such a promise or make such a command somebody takes it and in faith obeys it and something quite strange happens to them that they find that they are empowered and enabled to do what before it was impossible for them to do and that that's what what Christian life is about remember remember I told you how sin cripples you from doing what you want to do what you need to do Christ enables you to do what you need to do and that this kind of thing happens and I I I had I've had a lovely week gone by in which several people like that have come to me and just being with them has been for me an enabling experience enabling me to live my life in a different way enabling me to understand the grace and mercy of God in a new way and talking to one doctor that when

[31 : 29] Fran had her broken leg and we went to the hospital and when he found out that Fran was a counselor and I was a minister he immediately said well of course that's what we need in medicine medicine has come to the end of the road because they have neglected what people think they've neglected people's spiritual lives they've tried to treat them as purely physical beings and he said that's not enough because people are far more than that and so as he wound the cast onto Fran's leg he talked to us both and in such a way afterwards wonderfully refreshed and lifted by this encounter as though you had met Christ in a person who just made life seem wonderfully possible for you in a way that it hadn't before you met him that life was much more exciting and much more full of challenge now I'm not saying that he does that to everybody that comes along but he was used for

Fran and I I think just to give us I don't know why God in his grace chose to do that but it meant so much to us and sort of changed the outlook of the day for us and my friend who came in to see me early this week who's just been through a long period of chemotherapy and a long period of radiation therapy and who has been suffered the indignities of that long and difficult procedure and wonderfully aware of the grace of God at work in her life through the whole thing in such a way that she was a positive kind of healing experience just to talk to her and because of the way Christ had commanded her and she had obeyed and she was empowered to do what most people just stagger under you know they go down under it because it seems so impossible and yet and people are so fearful rather than faithful and because of the dreaded consequences of sin that locks us into a world where the redemptive and loving purposes of God don't break through to us and so we don't live in the awareness of

God that Christ's command is Christ's enabling and that and that's the way we're to live our lives and that's to be the source of our lives but that's what Christ did for this man in this quite remarkable way he said sin no more and the reason he said sin no more is because the man had seen for 38 years what sin had done that it had paralyzed him that it left him waiting with an expectation which was never realized that it had atrophied him that it slowly convinced him that there was no hope and that it didn't allow him even to consider the possibility of overcoming the reality of sin that he saw that process going on so it wasn't altogether unexpected that he would understand what Jesus meant when he said sin no more don't get into that process again don't give yourself over to that process again now a lot of people

I think Christ were warned several times in the New Testament about this that we're not to do it and the reason that we're not to do it is because this process is not what Christ has come to do what Christ is demonstrating to people is that he comes with the gift of life and life more abundant and that sin is not that and sin is moving in the other direction a lot of you know Paul ran into a lot of people whom he addressed in those wonderful verses in Romans where he said shall we continue in sin that grace may abound saying in effect to God we're good at sinning and you're good at forgiving so let's do what we're both good at but Paul answers by saying God forbid how shall we that are dead to sin live any longer there is how when you've been in the grip of it and that grip has been broken why would you go back into it why would you mess around with it again because the next time you'll become even more paralyzed and even more atrophied and even more incapable of believing in any possible answer and you know lots of people like that who God having wonderfully intervened in their life they've gone back and thought that they could afford to get in to sin again because God can forgive well it's a it doesn't work that way and you lay on yourself burdens that

I think become intolerable we can't we don't know how to handle them and that's what that's what Christ why Christ said to him you know sin no more and again you see this is this is a command do you see the same as rise take up your bed and walk this also is a command sin no more we looked at the first command and saw that when God gave it he when Christ gave it he empowered people to obey it when Christ gives this sin he empowers people when this this command he empowers people to obey it again you see how that works so he says to do that less so that nothing worse befalls you the other I mean one of the other great things about this story is that Christ here invades the territory of the helpless and the friendless and the hopeless you know and mostly our society tries to avoid that territory we try and put the helpless and the hopeless and the and the the the the the friendless we put them on one side so that they become more helpless more hopeless and more friendless and that and that whoever breaks into that situation we at a deep level of our consciousness

[38 : 27] I think avoid that because of fear for ourselves I think very often but Christ deliberately walks to the pool of Bethesda and goes among these people and deals with these people in this remarkable way so that I don't know where else in the whole of our society you can find the motivation to work with the helpless the hopeless and the friendless except as Christ enables you I don't know who else enables you to you can argue about that if you like but if you find an answer other than that I'd like to know what it is and so that you have that amazing picture of Christ doing that and dealing with people so what you have then essentially here and the way you have to look at this story

I think is you have to look at it not in terms of the kind of failure of religion because I think it really does demonstrate the failure of religion very often that people for 38 years gather where they think a miracle might one day happen and that miracle may one day touch them and they go on year after year after year and the miracle never happens and if it does it never touches them and so that you often find congregations full of people who are in despair as this man was and it's into that situation that Christ comes and he says in a sense do you want to be healed right here right now that's that's Jesus is is is very much the right here right now person you know everybody wants to put their encounter with Jesus off to somewhere sometime but Jesus says right here right now in the sense

I am I am available to you right here right now so that we find Jesus in the present circumstances of our lives and as these people did so that what you have to do when you look at this story is you have to see that it's essentially a revelation of who Jesus is and how he deals with people you know you don't look at him and say you know he healed a crippled man and I'm a crippled man therefore will he heal me he healed the crippled man in order to show everybody who he was and that he was one in whom they could put their faith and trust so that you have to see you have to see Jesus you have to see I think from this story how sin has the effect of turning us away from Jesus you know and leaving us in a condition of of despair basically that's

I don't think there's any other scene for it so Jesus picks out the individual from the crowd and he wants to show what he wants to do for us all as individuals and in the circumstances of our own individual lives and Jesus takes this man to despair and creates in him hope and and that's that's what happens this now is the third my time's up but I'll keep going just for one minute because I want to show you this one more thing this is the third time this is how I'll illustrate you can see that this is a cup of wine okay and you can see

I guess we can do it this way this is a jar of water and this is a pool of water do you remember the wedding and the water that became wine do you remember this woman at the well and the water from Jacob's well and are you greater than our father Jacob he says I'll give you living water so you will never thirst again now we're at a pool a kind of dirty stagnant pool in which people hope to find healing and Christ shows them where healing really comes from all these illustrations somehow include water it's and so I thought to put it together for you this way so you can remember it remember when you go into a restaurant and some obsequious waiter comes up and says would you like something from the bar and tell him you'd like water please and since he expected to sell you a five dollar cocktail he shows his visible disappointment as much as to say another one of these so this is how you deal with those kind of people

[44 : 22] I've decided when you go to the bar you say to him I'd like water but the kind that you can change to wine please or you could say you know I would like such a drink as I will never thirst again please or you can say I would like water please that will heal me that will transform my life and give me hope and that's that's in a sense what Christ is saying and I don't I don't think that I don't think you can read this story and escape facing this invitation yourself as an individual but this is what Christ came to do to change the water into wine to meet your deepest thirst and to provide a source of healing from death to life from despair to hope and these stories all come one on top of another and they all point mysteriously to you as a person to

Christ as Lord and in them all he speaks to us and says I think do you want a drink would you like something from the bar because this is the selection I have to offer let me say a prayer our God by your Holy Spirit help us to see Jesus and Jesus is the one who takes our takes us paralyzed by sin and hopelessness and despair and brings us to a place of hope and joy and life grant that we may encounter you in the present circumstances of our lives

Lord Jesus and that we may receive from you what you alone can give and that having given it to us commanded it of us you will empower us to hear it to receive it and to obey it we ask in your holy name Amen Amen Amen Amen