

You Are No Longer Powerless

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[0 : 00] Okay. Let me start by asking a question. I'd love to do this to get started. I want to, and so I'm going to ask a question, then I'll give you a moment to think, and then I'll want to hear what your answers are. So here's the question. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase victim mentality? Okay, the phrase victim mentality. Think for a moment here.

What comes to mind when you hear that phrase? What are some things you associate with a victim mentality? Nobody? A martyr? Oh, you know, a real martyr.

Okay. Yeah, you're a victim and therefore all that you do is excused. The rules don't apply to you, right? What else? Sorry? Not my fault. Not my fault.

It's your whole identity, right? I'm a victim and nothing but a victim. Yeah. I think we would associate, if you know someone that you're like, I would call this, say this person is a victim mentality. You might think of this, you might recognize in this person, they feel helpless, discouraged, depressed. There's just this passive acceptance of just whatever happens, even to the point of not taking action, even when action is possible.

Often there's that, yeah, that viewing oneself as innocent. Sometimes you blame others, right? You hold other people in your life or society responsible for not just some things, but all things that take place in your life. And that it's not just a, you know, we all have those moments, okay, right?

[2 : 04] All of us have been guilty of doing all those things, but it just becomes this lifelong pattern. Like Jody said, it's sort of to this point, this is your whole identity and it's the way that you handle all these things in life. Now, did you know that Jesus once encountered a man with a victim mentality? Probably more than once, but we have at least one record of Jesus encountering a man like that. And you'll find that in John chapter five, verses one through 18.

And so we're going to spend two weeks in this text. If you're using one of the blue Bibles or Usher's handout, it's on page 890. And in John chapter five, verses one through 18, we're going to go through it twice and we're going to look at it from two perspectives. So the first time today, we're going to ask the question, how does Jesus view someone who has been a victim of difficult circumstances? How does Jesus view someone who has been a victim of difficult circumstances? What's his mentality? And then the second time through next week, we're going to go through it again. And this time we're going to ask the question, how can I follow Jesus by helping victims of difficult circumstances? How can I follow in Jesus' footsteps by helping people who are victims of difficult circumstances? So today, today is for the victims. Next week is for the helpers, right? Now, if you want the full story, you need to be here both weeks because to a certain degree, I mean, to a certain degree, everyone here, maybe to just a little degree, maybe to a massive degree, you are a victim of difficult circumstances. And you are also a helper of those who are in difficult circumstances.

You suffer and you comfort those who suffer. You are afflicted and you support those who are afflicted. So here's the big idea for today. In every difficult circumstance, God calls you to acknowledge your affliction and accept your agency. And we're going to walk through what all of that means.

But that's the calling that Jesus is going to give to a man that he encounters in John chapter 5. So why don't you follow along? I'm going to read John chapter 5 verses 1 through 18.

[4 : 39] And follow along in your copy of scripture as I read. After this, there was a feast of the Jews. And Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now there is in Jerusalem, by the sheep gate, a pool, an Aramaic called Bethesda, which is five roofed colonnades. And these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for 38 years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had

already been there a long time, he said to him, do you want to be healed? The sick man answered him, sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. And while I am going, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, get up, take up your bed and walk. And at once the man was healed and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, it is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.

But he answered them, the man who healed me, that man said to me, take up your bed and walk. They asked him, who is the man who said to you, take up your bed 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. Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered them, my father is working until now, and I am working.

This is why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him. Because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own father, making himself equal with God. This is the word of the Lord. Now in this passage, we discover that Jesus brings a mindset to this encounter. Jesus is approaching this man in perfect alignment with God's own will, God's own attitude, God's own mindset toward the man. And by looking to Jesus, we learn that in every difficult circumstance, God calls you to acknowledge your affliction and accept your agency. So let's start by taking a look at the man that Jesus encounters. How does Jesus encounter him? Well, first, we have the man lying by this pool of

[7 : 55] Bethesda. And this is one of many people at the pool whom John describes as invalids. And translated literally, the word is powerless. They are powerless. It's the same thing as our English word disabled.

So they are disabled, powerless. Why are they there at that pool? Well, a few later manuscripts of the Gospel of John, they include what seems to be a translator's note that says, an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred the water. Whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had. Now, sounds like that's a pretty reasonable explanation of what's going on, or at least what these people believe is going on. The man believes he will be healed of his disability if he can just be the first one into the water when it stirred up. But he can't. And in verse 5, the very first thing that John tells us about this man is that he has had this condition and he has been in this situation for 38 years.

Do you know someone who's struggled with a disability for 38 years? Or suffered chronic pain for 38 years?

Or felt an intense, unfulfilled desire for 38 years straight? Someone like that, you've long since made it your identity. Your suffering has become your identity.

[9 : 38] Your whole life is ordered around it. Maybe you don't even know what you would do with yourself if your affliction were removed. There's just no escaping it.

Before anything else, John tells us that this man is suffering affliction. And he emphasizes not the degree of affliction, but the length of it. Here's where we're going to see how God calls you to respond to suffering.

First, acknowledge your affliction. Acknowledge your affliction, your suffering. That's the first part of the mindset God wants you to have when you suffer.

And let's watch Jesus, because Jesus illustrates what it means to acknowledge your affliction. First, we read in verse 6, Jesus, what's the very first thing Jesus does?

Jesus saw. Jesus saw him lying there. He is gazing at the man. He is observing him. He is studying him.

[10 : 44] Jesus sees. He sees the man's disability. And that's because his disability is out in the open. It is not hidden. It is there for Jesus to see.

That is very important, because this man cannot be helped if Jesus does not first see him. Why should you acknowledge your affliction?

Because your suffering is meant to be seen, not hidden. Your suffering is meant to be seen, not hidden. And we give a lot of reasons why we hide our afflictions.

I don't want to bother anyone. I don't want anyone to see my weakness. I don't want anyone to judge me. I'm not saying that there aren't times when certain things have to be discreet.

You have to be careful who you share them with. I'm not saying you broadcast all your afflictions on Mountain FM, okay? But there are things that you are going through. Some of you, there are things that you are going through right now and you have not told anyone about.

[11:53] And that's wrong. You are not meant to suffer in silence. If you are, then you are not acknowledging your affliction. You are not responding to your difficult circumstances the way that God is calling you to do.

Do you have good models for how to respond to suffering? Do you have people whom you can pattern yourself after for how you respond, how you acknowledge your affliction? Some of the best models that we have in Scripture are the authors of the Psalms.

And, you know, by one count this week as I was looking at it, out of the 150 Psalms, 59 of them are laments. That's 40% of the Psalms are laments.

They're Psalms in which the author is pouring out his sorrow, his misery to God, and it's on public display. That's 40%. That's 40%. And then there's even more Psalms that have some words of lament in them.

Imagine if 40% of our worship songs we got together on Sunday morning and 40% of our worship songs that we sang together were laments. Then maybe we begin to recognize our suffering is meant to be seen, not hidden.

[13:06] This is an ordinary part of the Christian life. If this were not an ordinary part of the Christian life, your Bible would not have 59 Psalms. It would be, I don't know, what's that?

91 Psalms in length, the book. This means that if you want a right relationship with God, if you want a relationship with God that is all that is meant to be, if you want a relationship with God's people that is what it is meant to be, then lament is going to be a regular part of the way that you speak to God and that you speak with others.

It will become a regular part of our relationship in the church. A part of our conversations, a part of our singing, a part of our worship, a part of our prayer.

Your suffering is meant to be seen, not hidden. Jesus sees the suffering of the disabled man in verse 6. But then Jesus still has one more thing to do before he speaks.

So if you look again at verse 6, Jesus does a second thing. We read that Jesus knew. He saw, then he knew. Jesus knew that he had already been there a long time.

[14:27] Now John doesn't say whether Jesus came to know this through some sort of supernatural means or whether it was just through a normal conversation. It doesn't matter how he came to know it.

What matters is that Jesus did come to understand it. It's important to know. It is important to Jesus to understand.

Jesus is a really, really good listener. This means that your suffering is meant to be understood, not dismissed. Your suffering is meant to be understood, not dismissed.

Now, it's possible that your first response to hearing that is something along these lines. Yes, finally. Somebody said it.

Tell my family and friends to stop dismissing my suffering. All right? Well, tell you what. Call up your family and friends. Tell them to come back next week and I'll give it to them. Okay? Today is for you.

[15:31] Today I'm talking to you because some of you are dismissing your own suffering. Some of you are dismissing your own suffering. Imagine that you are writing your own psalm of lament.

Imagine if you had written Psalm 3 and imagine that you started out the psalm, the first two verses, and following the first two verses, you dismissed your own suffering. Here's how the psalm would go.

Oh, Lord, how many are my foes. Many are rising against me. Many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God. But, hey, it's no big deal.

I'll survive. It is what it is. Other people have it worse. You ever use phrases like that? Those phrases are all about self-reliance, aren't they?

You want to show, hey, you know, if the suffering isn't so great, then I can handle it. I can do it myself. I'm tough enough to weather adversity.

[16:36] It's that fake toughness. It's an independence from God and it's wrong. As long as you pretend that you're not really suffering, there is no need to say what David says in Psalm 3.

But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord and he answered me from his holy hill.

God makes it clear that, yes, your suffering is a big deal. It's a big deal to him. You are meant to admit this. You are not meant to play it off.

So stop playing the stoic. That's wrong. How you feel is important to God. Your suffering is meant to be understood, not dismissed.

So these are two ways that you might refuse to acknowledge your affliction. You might hide your suffering and you might dismiss it.

[17 : 41] But in every difficult circumstance, God calls you to acknowledge your affliction by letting it be seen and letting it be understood. So we've talked about your affliction.

Let's talk about your agency. Because Jesus has to do a lot of work with this man about his agency. In your bulletin, I've included a definition of the term free agency.

I've adapted it from J.I. Packers. He's got a little book, Concise Theology. Okay, free agency existed long before the NHL, okay? Long before hockey.

You're a free agent, okay? You don't have to be a hockey player to be a free agent. Here's Packers' fuller, expanded definition of what it means to have free agency. So this is the full thing. I, you know, narrowed it down to fit in your bulletin.

But here's what Packers says. Free agency is a mark of human beings as such. All humans are free agents in the sense that they make their own decisions as to what they will do, choosing as they please in the light of their sense of right and wrong and the inclinations they feel.

[19 : 00] Thus, they are moral agents, answerable to God and each other for their voluntary choices. So you are a free agent.

You are not a robot. You are not a prisoner of fate. Your choices are not controlled by other people. Ever. Yes, it's true that everything you do does take place according to the sovereign will, purpose, and plan of God.

But one of the great paradoxes of Scripture, the thing that seems contradictory but is in fact true, is that yes, God is sovereign over all of that. But at the same time, you are choosing it all freely.

You are willing it. And you are willing it out of your own desires. You do what you do because you desire to do it. It's either the conscious desires or deep subconscious inclinations in your heart.

You are a free agent. You are also a moral agent. You are created in the image of God, which means that as his image, a bearer of his image, you are created to represent his character, to show people what God is like.

[20 : 21] When you will, when you choose, when you act, you are telling people, here is what God is like. Here is what holiness looks like in everything you do.

For this reason, you are morally accountable to God and to your fellow man for the choices that you make. And all the choices you make are legitimate choices.

You are not powerless. You do have agency. Accept your agency. Accept your agency. You will find that every word Jesus speaks to this disabled man is about urging him to accept his agency.

Jesus speaks to him three times. So let's go through them. The first thing that Jesus does is he asks the man a question. In verse 6, Jesus asks him, Do you want to be healed?

Do you want to be healed? Now that's a question that we would call a yes or no question, right? Two possible answers. Yes and no.

[21 : 40] Does the man reply yes or no? He actually doesn't give an answer to Jesus. He never expresses to Jesus what he wants.

Jesus asks the man to share, to open up his heart and share his desire, one way or the other. And the man refuses to do it.

There is, so there is already a sense that Jesus is viewing the disabled man differently than the man views himself. Jesus views him as having agency. Jesus views you as having agency.

This means that in every circumstance, you have real desires. In every circumstance, you have real desires. You have desires.

You have wants. You have longings deep inside of you. Now sometimes, you don't know what your desires are. Okay, that's the thing about desires.

[22 : 38] We don't always know what they are. Sometimes we have desires and we're not consciously aware of them. Sometimes they're inward tendencies. But you do have them. And you always make decisions according to your desires.

You can't choose what you don't desire. You know, you're thinking, well, I didn't choose to have my kidney removed. And, you know, saying, well, yeah, but it was infected and you had a greater desire to be healthy.

So yeah, you did want your kidney removed. Sometimes our desires conflict. We always do what we want to do, whatever our strongest desire is. You have real desires.

You always act according to what you desire. But the disabled man seems to be evasive about his desire to get well. He evades Jesus' question.

He won't admit it. Now there are many reasons why someone might act like they don't want anything, like they have no desires. You know, there's a, you know, sometimes there's a false submission where we think that biblical submission means I never say what I want and I act like I don't want anything and just I'll go along with whatever the authority figure says.

[23 : 48] That's a false submission. It's completely contrary to the biblical idea of submission. There's the people pleaser who just goes along with everything to keep people happy and they pretend like they don't want anything.

But there's a third reason that I think that seems to really be more prominent here when you consider how long this man has been disabled. A third reason you might pretend to have no wants is just straight despair.

Despair. You've had desires, dreams, and they have been crushed. And maybe they've been crushed over and over again and it hurts.

It hurts so badly. And eventually it just becomes easier just to stop desiring anything at all. Or more accurately, you shove the desire way, way, way, way down and lock it away.

And you pretend to yourself and you pretend to other people that you don't really want anything. Your desires remain unvoiced, locked away, and then that way they can't emerge to hurt you again.

[24 : 54] Now, I'm not saying there are never situations where you don't share your desires. I'm just asking you, you know, have you made it a habit to pretend as though you have no desires or that a certain, you pretend that you don't have a certain desire.

Now, I'm not saying the desires that you might have locked away are all good desires. They might not be good desires. But they can't be addressed. They can't be spoken to if they are locked away. So it's time to admit it. You are a free agent, which means that in every circumstance you do have real desires. That's part of who you are.

Part of how God made you. Let's look at verse 7 now. Because now for the first time the man speaks and we get a glimpse into the way that he is thinking about his circumstances and about himself.

So Jesus asked him, do you want to be healed? The man doesn't answer his question. Here's what he does say in verse 7. Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up.

[26 : 05] And while I am going in, another steps down before me. So, all right. You know, put your glasses on, look carefully at this.

In this man's account of his situation, who would you say he is assigning agency to? Who does he assign agency to? Who in his story of his life does he say has agency?

Who are the active people? Someone else. Always someone else. It is only someone else.

The man gives Jesus two categories of people in his life. One, there are people who choose not to act. They aren't there to lower him into the pool. These people who have not, they have not loved him enough, they have not helped him enough.

That's one category of people. Two, there are people who have chosen to act. These other people have gotten into the water first. They have prevented him from being healed.

[27 : 15] They have done him harm. This is the substance of the victim mentality we talked about earlier. The victim mentality is this. Everyone else has agency.

I don't have agency. Everyone else has power. I am powerless. But what does Jesus think? Verse 8.

Jesus said to him, Get up. Take up your bed and walk. And at once the man was healed and he took up his bed and walked.

You know what Jesus is doing? He is appealing to the disabled man's will. He speaks to the man as though he is not powerless.

He speaks to the man. He assigns him agency. You give command to someone who has agency. And here is the point Jesus is making. In every circumstance you have real choices.

[28 : 16] In every circumstance you have real choices. Now, there are people who read this passage and they distort this by speaking as though, Wow, you could always just be healed if you have enough faith.

Well, this guy is, we are going to see, is not a model of faith. That is a very poor interpretation of this passage. Rather, I think what's being modeled here, the point Jesus is making is this.

No matter what situation you are in, you always have a choice about how you respond to it. Your behavior in whatever circumstance you are in in your life, your behavior is not forced by anything outside of you.

It is not a mechanical consequence of other people's actions. You are a willing being. What that means is that your circumstance is significant.

We've already talked about that. Your circumstance is significant. But it does not determine how you respond. It does not determine how you respond.

[29 : 24] And this is something, by the way, this is true of every human being. Even if you're not a Christian, every human being does have free agency. But if you are a Christian, this gets even more wonderful.

Because it means that if you truly are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit at work in you. That means that you are not only a willing being with the ability to make real choices, but now those choices can be holy choices, right behaviors, good works that honor God.

Why can you will what is right and good? Because the Holy Spirit has begun to form holy desires in you. And you can will according to those desires.

That's why the Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 8, for the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law.

Indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if, in fact, the Spirit of God dwells in you.

[30 : 43] Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him, but if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if, by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. you can always, always, always, honor and obey God.

If you are a Christian, there never is, there never will be any situation in your life where you can't do what God requires, where you can legitimately say, I just can't obey God, I can't follow God's law, can't be done.

That's a claim to not be a Christian, by the way. If you say that, what you are saying is I don't have the Spirit of God at work in me, I'm not a Christian. There never is, never will be a temptation that you must give into.

[32 : 00] In 1 Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul writes, no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.

But with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it. That is a promise.

You are a free agent and if you have believed in Jesus Christ, if you have been saved by grace through faith, if you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, then you are no longer powerless.

You are no longer powerless to glorify God, to do what he has called you to do in every circumstance, in every affliction. You don't have to sin.

Ever. In every circumstance, you have real choices. Let's return to John chapter 5 one last time because after Jesus heals the disabled man, things, they sort of take an unexpected turn.

[33 : 20] The man gets in trouble because he is carrying his, the mat he was lying on, he picks it up, he starts carrying it around and it's the Sabbath day. And that, oh boy, that's a violation of the customs and traditions of the Jewish leadership.

Oh man, they go after the guy. They assign blame. And guess what the man does in verse 11? He throws Jesus under the bus. The man who healed me, that man said to me, take up your bed and walk.

He tries that age old tactic. That's as old as Genesis chapter 3. The tactic of blame shifting. You free yourself from moral responsibility by shifting the agency to other people.

You shift the agency to other people. He's doing it again. So in verse 14, Jesus actually goes, seeks the man out, finds him a second time and this time he does it to issue him a challenge.

See, you are well. Sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you. Whew. Jesus is emphasizing that this man is morally accountable to God for his behavior.

[34 : 43] This man is not a powerless victim. This man cannot evade moral responsibility for the things he says and does. someone with a victim mentality, I often see it's people, it'll often come out in someone who craves empathy but refuses responsibility.

I've seen people say, I just want empathy. Everything would be better if everyone just showed me more empathy and you're right. Everything really would be, everything really would be better if people acknowledged your afflictions.

That's not wrong. That's good. You're out, you're wanting a good thing. I'll get on their case about it next week, okay? If that's you, bring them back next week, I'll tell them to show you, show you compassion.

But for now, know this, you can ask for empathy but you have to also, at the same time, accept responsibility for your own actions, for your own thoughts, your own habits, your own words, your decisions that you yourself have freely willed.

In fact, if you refuse to accept a responsibility, you're actually going to get other people hurt because this disabled man gets Jesus hurt.

[36 : 02] The story ends with the man throwing Jesus under the bus a second time and Jesus ends up being afflicted in his place. If you are the victim of how other people have treated you, here are two things that are true.

First, when it comes to other people, you are not responsible for their choices. Man, sometimes people blame themselves for what other people have freely chosen.

They are free agents too, remember that. Everyone around you is making choices too and you should never assume responsibility for the choices that other people make. Second, you are responsible for your own manner of life and for your own decisions.

In every circumstance, you have real responsibility. In every circumstance, you have real responsibility. Remember Jesus' words in verse 14.

He says, sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you. Look, this is something in my own life that I've had to come face to face with.

[37 : 22] This is a sermon that is not a theoretical thing but a reality for me. Like, I've realized that in my own life, I've often failed to act, I've failed to speak at times to others because in my mind, I'm like, oh well, they'll just do this, they'll just do that.

And in my mind, I'm blaming them and so I don't speak. In my mind, I assign the other person as oh, they have agency, they're just gonna do this and this and that and so I shouldn't do anything at all.

You have real agency, you have real responsibility and you are not responsible for the choices other people make, you're responsible for your own. Sometimes the choices we make make it really difficult for other people to love us and we're not responsible for their failure to love us but you are responsible for making their job really difficult.

if I withdraw from any of you and refuse to tell you what's going on with me or lash out at you and you reach out to me, that's not, that's not on you, that's on me and you could keep pushing through and keep loving me even then but I gotta take responsibility for how I act towards you.

That's how I escape the victim mentality. And that's how you do too. Sin no more that nothing worse may happen to you.

[39 : 02] There might be a reason why this man doesn't have many friends around him. Jesus is telling this man that one day too it will not merely be other people.

He will have to stand before God and give an account of his life. He will have to appear before the judgment seat of God. That's what commentators believe Jesus is referring to here. What's the nothing worse?

Judgment. His desires, his choices. He is morally responsible, he is liable to pay whatever penalty the judge decrees for him.

And on that awful judgment day, where will you be? will you be counted among the guilty, among those who refuse to accept blame in this life, but will not be able to escape it when you stand before Jesus Christ as your judge?

Will he be among those who face the punishment of hell, the fires of eternal destruction? will you be counted among those who have said, I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing I have life in his name.

[40 : 18] Will you be counted among those who by faith are united with Jesus Christ, who are called by his name?

Will you be counted among those who no longer face any penalty for sin because Jesus paid it all on the cross? Will you be counted among those who are raised to new resurrection life, those who even have a taste of this good life here in the present?

Will you be counted among those who have received the Spirit of God to empower you, to equip you, to honor your Father in heaven? If you have the Spirit of God, accept your agency.

Know that the Spirit is transforming you. He is making you holy and loving and wise. His mission, his singular mission is to make you like Jesus.

That is God's dream for your life. and he will work at nothing. He will stop at nothing to make that happen if you really are a child of God.

[41 : 38] If you have the Spirit of God, acknowledge your affliction and know that one day God will wipe away every tear from your eyes.

That is good news. If you have the Spirit of God, brothers and sisters, you are no longer powerless. Our God and our Father, we thank you for the incredible kindness, the love that you have shown to us.