

# THE SEARCH FOR HEALING

*SERIES: ONE TO ONE*

**By Danny Hall**

When I get up in the morning, I have the awful habit of checking the email. Our email is on Comcast, so the home page of Comcast comes up, and it features news headlines. It's a depressing way to start the day, because right off it lists all the things that have gone crazy in the world—the latest body count in the Middle East, and so on. But sprinkled through the list are bizarre items about celebrities and athletes. The juxtaposition is always startling; we realize that with war, famine, problems all over the place, there's something terribly wrong in the world, but then we seem to go into denial by making things like celebrity news into headlines, as if we're more interested in Brad and Angelina's baby, for instance, than we are in what's going on in a lot of the real hot spots of our world. We have this way of jerking back and forth, because I think it's hard for us to admit that things are really screwed up.

The other place I hate to look in the morning is the mirror. It's not only because I'm getting older and the gray just keeps encroaching more and more, but also because looking in the mirror allows me to look deep within myself. And whenever I stop long enough to do that, I figure out that there's also something terribly wrong in my own life. That's the story of human life: there's just something terribly wrong.

In the story we're going to look at today, a certain man has something terribly wrong with him. In his story we'll find a deep need for healing, and perhaps something that can point us to the way forward. John 5:1-15:

**Some time later, 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 thirty-eight 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.’”**

**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.**

There are so many amazing things in this story. The first thing that strikes you is that this man has been lying by this pool for thirty-eight years. Can you imagine?

The pool of Bethesda was in the city of Jerusalem near one of the gates. This pool has been called by several names. Superstition had it that an angel would come down and stir the waters of the pool, and the first person who got into the water afterward would be healed. If you look at this text in your Bible, you’ll notice that a verse referring to this superstition is usually left out, because most scholars believe it was not in the original manuscript.

This man has been lying by the pool for thirty-eight years because he is lame, and he's been living in the hope of the superstition, but somehow he hasn't been able to be first in the water in this contest.

Jesus walks into this scene, and a wonderful story unfolds.

### **Do you want to get well?**

We're going to look at three themes that run through the story. The first is the essential question. Jesus asks him what I think he wants to ask all of us today: "Do you want to get well?"

At first it appears almost cruel for Jesus to ask this question. This man has been lame for a very, very long time, and his whole life has been defined by this. You would think it would go without saying that he wants to get well. But when I think about all the things that plague me and people I know, I realize how important this question is for us to consider. This man has a ready excuse for why he's still in the same state that he's been in there for thirty-eight years, and I would suggest to you that all of us have reasons why it's sometimes very difficult for us to answer that question in the affirmative: "Yes, I want to get well."

How many of these reasons apply to this man I'm not sure, because we don't know his whole background. There are implications in his response that give us some idea. But let me suggest four things that hinder us sometimes from answering, "Yes, I want to get well."

The first hindrance is identity. A lot of people have lived with some issue for so long that it has become who they are. This man has probably become known around the community as the lame guy who's been at the pool for years and years. His whole existence has become wrapped around this infirmity. It has somehow taken over who he is, and he can't conceive of himself apart from it.

One of my longtime, dearest friends had a deep wound from his father when he was young, a wound that has never really completely healed. He's a wonderful person, but so much of his life has been wrapped up in that wound that it's kind of his identity. People notice us because of what's wrong with us sometimes. I've known other people for whom that was true, whether it was physical or psychological or relational or emotional. So we sometimes hang on to what's wrong with us.

This poor man by the pool is alone, and perhaps the only reason anyone ever notices him at all is his infirmity. It has given him his whole sense of identity.

The second hindrance is fear. If our whole identity is wrapped up in our infirmity, then often we are afraid of what would happen to us if this infirmity were removed from us, if there were some radical change in our life. We fear what we might become, or what might be expected of us.

I've wrestled with this myself. There are things in my life that go on and on, and I'm sure my wife wishes they get would get healed. She tries her best with me, and we work on these things,

but there's part of me that fears that if my life really changed, then everyone would expect me to be different, do different things, be better than I am. I don't know what that world would be like, so I'm afraid to go for it. I'm afraid for Christ to come and touch my life deeply. I don't know if I have enough faith to walk into that newness, no matter how much I might think I want it.

A third reason that we often don't find healing in Christ is hopelessness. We don't actually believe that anything will ever change. We may even see other people coming out of things into a new place because God is doing something in their lives, but we say that will never happen to us. For this lame man, that hopelessness is all the more deeply entrenched because of his loneliness and isolation. His response when Jesus says, "Do you want to be healed?" is, "I don't have anyone to help me." What an awful thing to be true of you! Caught in his isolation, despair, superstition, and physical infirmity, he's been stuck in this place for all these years, and there's a sense of hopelessness. Nothing will ever change. He has nowhere to go.

A fourth reason why we might not be able to have Jesus' healing in our lives is pride. A lot of us don't want to admit that we have weaknesses that need healing.

That's certainly true in my own life. I am very adept at hiding things. One of the things I admire about my wife is her openness. She can talk about issues in her life. It's painful for me to talk about what's going on in my life, and part of that is just pride. I want to appear to be all together. So many people look like they have it all together, and they intimidate us. Now, I'll let you in on a secret: nobody has it all together. But in the western world, and particularly in the United States, we have an incredible apparatus set up to make us look good. Our pride does not want us

to look bad to other people. We don't want people to think that we have something horrible going on in our life. So pride paralyzes us and prevents us from finding true healing. That is true for most people, whether they've never had the opportunity to taste of God's goodness and grace, or they've walked with the Lord for a very long time.

Jesus asks this lame man if he wants to be healed, and the man makes an excuse. But Jesus just speaks into the middle of that. I love how Jesus always seems to be totally unfazed by people's attitudes or by their problems. It was true of him with the woman at the well, and with Nicodemus, and it's true with this man.

Jesus looks into his eyes and says, "Get up and walk." Now this man has a choice. After all those years of being wrapped up in this infirmity, all the fear and the loneliness, what is he going to do? The story says he picks up his mat and walks. That seems simple enough for us, but can you imagine the incredible courage and faith it took for this man to do that? He could look back at Jesus and say, "Thanks a lot—you're making fun of my infirmity, aren't you?" But something in the powerful words of Jesus brings healing to this man's body, and he picks up his mat and walks.

One of the keys to finding God's healing in our lives is stepping out in obedience, trusting that the healing work of Christ is indeed happening.

## **The prejudice of power**

Now at this point in the story a dark side intrudes. This is the second theme of the story. It's going to keep coming up in the stories that we'll look at in this series. That dark side is the prejudice of power. The Jewish leaders all of a sudden appear on the scene, and they see this man walking and carrying his mat on the Sabbath. They immediately confront him: "Hey, you can't carry that mat on the Sabbath, don't you know that?"

His response is, "The man who healed me told me to pick it up and walk."

Now, it's very interesting what happens. I don't know about you, but I hope I'm a little bit better than the Pharisees (although I've probably done the same dumb, self-righteous thing they did). Here's a man walking toward them carrying a mat. He's violating the Sabbath law, so they call him on it. The man tells them about the one who healed him. Now, I would like to think that at that point I would be excited for him. "You were healed? Tell me about it!" But they don't go there at all. They're not the least bit concerned about this man. Their next question is, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick up the mat and walk?"

You see, the power of these leaders in their society was derived from their control of people through their position as teachers of the law. They had to preserve that power. Israel had been reduced to a little colony over in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, but its leaders maintained their position through the system of law that they had built up in their society. Everyone had to obey that law and had to regard them as the final arbiters and interpreters of the law. So success



in life, even spiritual success, was determined by their allegiance to the law, and the ones who controlled the interpretation of that law were powerful people.

This is what is behind their prejudice: they immediately have to control the situation. They cannot enter into it. So they begin to abuse the Torah, the very law of God, which itself is righteous and holy, revealing the wonderful character of God and his intention for us. The law of God becomes corrupted in the hands of sinful man, as Scott Grant shared with us out of Romans 7 (Discovery Paper 4957) not long ago. It gets corrupted by the power of sin, and it becomes an institutional tool for the preservation of power and control by those in the leadership at a given point. And they cannot have anything challenge their authority—not Jesus, not a healed man carrying a mat. There must be uniformity. That is the third, incredible theme of this story—the absolute tyranny of rules and expectations in our lives.

Here's what happens. It could be the Old-Testament law of God in the hands of leaders who use it to control people and to define their own sense of self-righteousness. Or it could be some other set of rules that someone makes up, or society's expectations and norms. The Christian society has developed a portrait of what it means to be a good Christian, and it has a list of rules and expectations of people. But if we allow that to become what defines who we are, then there is a shift away from God and toward the rules and expectations, to the point that what matters is conformity to those expectations. And in our own sinfulness, we are very adept at (1) imposing that on others, and (2) having it imposed on us. We live our lives lining up with other people's expectations of what it is to be a good Christian or a good person.

Sometimes as parents we impose that on our children, even when we have the best of motives; we just want to help them grow up to be wise and godly people. “If you perform this way, I will affirm you.”

So we are conditioned to focus on rules and expectations in the way we live. It is a normal human phenomenon. But when we do that, it is very difficult for us to see God, because our focus is on making sure that we look right and that other people accept us. The tragedy is that when our focus is on rules and expectations, we obscure the healing power of God. These leaders of Jewish society are so concerned that this man is carrying a mat on the Sabbath, and that someone dared question the authority of their interpretation of Torah, that the healing power of God is diminished.

Fortunately, this story takes a different turn again. This is our third theme in the story.

## **The deeper healing**

The man who has been healed has no clue who Jesus is, and Jesus has slipped off into the crowd. But a little later Jesus finds this man by himself. He says, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” On the surface, this again seems like a cruel statement. This man has been lying by the pool for thirty-eight years, crippled his whole life! But I think in effect what Jesus is basically saying is that there is something worse than being crippled your whole life. He wants him to look beneath the surface. While Jesus compassionately meets our

needs on many levels, he wants to direct our attention to the deeper healing that he offers. So he says to this man, “Stop sinning,” because he knows that deep within his heart he needs something more than simply being able to walk. He needs to be able to connect with God. He needs to be touched not only in his body, but in the deepest places in his soul. So he takes him to the place of true healing, to his deepest need, which is for forgiveness.

As in many of these stories in John, the ending isn’t told. This is all we know of this man. We have no record whatsoever of whether he does seek a deeper healing. We know that he immediately goes and informs the Jewish leaders of who healed him, now that he knows who Jesus is. We don’t know his motive for doing that, but it leads to a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees that is going to escalate and lead ultimately to the cross.

But Jesus offers to him, and to you and me, something far deeper than physical healing, which is possible only through the gracious touch of Christ himself. So we come full circle to that same question that God asks us: “Do you want to get well?” All of us have different areas of our life that need to be healed. Some of us truly have physical problems for which we want God’s healing touch. And there are relational problems, psychological and emotional problems, and spiritual problems. There are areas of our lives that we have not yielded to the Lord, and there’s this constant trouble in our lives because of our unsettledness in spirit. Jesus wants to touch the deepest problems that we have and bring us back to that wonderful place of relationship with him, where there is forgiveness and grace and transformation through his power.

In a different story in Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Jesus wants us to walk in faith, and as that man picked up his mat and walked in faith and obedience, Jesus asks us to enter into a relationship of trust and obedience to him today, to believe that he can transform us and heal us.

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John 5:1-15

Third Message

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