

DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?

by Ray C. Stedman

I picked up the latest issue of *Time Magazine* last week and found that the entire issue was devoted to a celebration of *Time*'s sixtieth year in publishing. The theme of the magazine was, "The most amazing sixty years in history." It was a review of many events of the past sixty years, a highly biased one, which centered around *Time*'s own existence. Even for such dramatic years as the past sixty, I thought that claim was rather ludicrous. It reminded me of the man who said to me last week that his tie was the greatest thing since peanut butter! I regarded both claims as having about equal validity.

There have been some great events in the last sixty years, many of world-shaking importance, but none of them, or all of them taken together, can remotely approach the impact that has been made upon this earth and its inhabitants by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Any honest historian would have to admit that to be true. No account of the explosion of an atom bomb, a voyage to the moon, or the outbreak of a world war equals in significance the words of John in his gospel, "the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," {cf, John 1:14}. It is that marvelous life we are focusing on in this gospel.

The fifth chapter marks a major division in the Gospel of John. In the prologue, John introduces the life of Jesus, and in the first four chapters Jesus presents himself to the Jews as the promised Messiah. But now, in Chapter 5, John begins to trace a growing rejection of the claims of Jesus, and a growth of virulent and malicious hostility in official circles against the ministry of the Lord. As a preview of what is covered in the gospel, this rejection will gather around three remarkable acts of healing by Jesus: here, in Chapter 5, the healing of the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda; in Chapter 9, the amazing account of the opening of the eyes of the man born blind; and in Chapter 11, the greatest of our Lord's miracles, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. All of this increases the hostility against Jesus until it culminates at last in his death.

Today we will look at the first of these miracles, the healing of the impotent man, John 5:1-5:

After this [i.e., the ministry he had in Galilee] there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Hebrew called Bethzatha [Bethesda], which has five porticoes. In these lay a multitude of invalids, blind, lame, paralyzed. One man was there, who had been ill for thirty-eight years. {John 5:1-5 RSV}

For many years the site of this pool was lost, covered with the debris of the centuries, but about 20 years ago it was discovered and excavated. (I was in Jerusalem in 1967, shortly after the porches were discovered.) The pool is located to the north part of the Temple Mount, near what is now called St. Stephen's Gate, which is, in fact, the site of the Sheep Gate mentioned here. In these porches, set at various levels around the pool, during our Lord's time it was the habit of many to gather during feast days, hoping for a healing miracle.

If you have any Bible other than the King James Version you will notice that Verse 4 is missing. Many versions include the verse in a footnote which explains why these people were there. They believed in a rather superstitious way that from time to time when the water was troubled -- when it would rise rapidly and then sink again -- that this was caused by an angel who visited the pool, and the first man who got into it when it was so troubled would be healed. This is akin to what is found in many parts of the world today. Lourdes, in southern France, has a spa which many believe has healing capacities. The shrine of Guadalupe, in Mexico City, has thousands of crutches stacked along its walls where people have been healed in this special place where they thought they could receive a blessing from God.

The facts, of course, are that the pool of Bethesda, like many similar pools in the Jerusalem area, is an

intermittent spring. At times water is released in surges from hidden reservoirs in the hills around the city, causing these springs to rise and fall suddenly. This is what gave rise to the superstition about an angel troubling the pool. Undoubtedly healings did occur there. Even today healings take place in these special areas where people go, believing they can be healed. But most of these healings can be explained psychologically. When people believe they are going to be healed, and they are in a place where healings supposedly occur, and they do the expected thing, many of them are healed. Thus the pool at Bethesda had established a reputation as a place where people could be healed.

I used to think that this man at the pool at Bethesda had lain there for 38 years. But it does not say that; it says he had been ill for 38 years. We do not know why. He is not called a "lame" man (or a cripple, in James Watts' vocabulary!). He is weak, feeble, and unable to stand, probably because of some wasting disease -- perhaps cancer, tuberculosis, or multiple sclerosis. In any event his disease made him unable to walk for 38 years.

So here was a great crowd of people -- paralyzed, blind, lame, sick -- all waiting for the water to be troubled. Out of that crowd Jesus picked one lone man. He did not empty the five porches, healing everybody. He did not invite them all to come down so that he might lay hands on them; nothing of that sort. He went to only one man. The value of a story like this, and the reason it is in the gospels, is not only to reveal to us who Jesus was -- truth about the Lord himself -- but also to show us how God proposes to deal with human helplessness and weakness. Undoubtedly it was the helplessness of this man that drew Jesus to him.

We all can see ourselves, in a sense, helpless, weak, crippled and lame, lying at the pool of Bethesda this morning. We all need help. We all find ourselves paralyzed at times, unable to do the thing we want or ought to do. We find we are lame: we do not walk very well spiritually. This story is included in the gospels in order that we might understand how God proposes to help us through the ministry of Jesus.

John goes on to say what Jesus did:

When Jesus saw him and knew he had been lying there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" {John 5:6 RSV}

What a strange question to ask of a man who had been sick for 38 years! "Do you want to be healed? But Jesus never asked a foolish question in his life. Obviously it was important for this man to answer (at least to himself) the question, "Do I want to be healed?"

I know many people today who do not want to be healed. They do not want to receive divine help in their problems. They do not want to be helped out of their weakness. They love their weakness, their helplessness. They are always craving the attention of others through their helplessness. They sometimes flee assuming responsibility for their own lives. I have even seen people turn their backs on a way of deliverance they knew would work because they did not want to be healed.

I am sure if this man had answered Jesus along these lines our Lord would have gone his way and not done a thing for him. You cannot help somebody who does not want to be helped. One of the things that is true this morning, as our Lord moves among us, is that he will only ask this question of those who want to be healed. He will say nothing to those who do not.

Some, perhaps, may not have yet reached the place this man had reached. They are not helpless enough yet. They are not ready to give up on human efforts to solve their problems. They are not ready to admit they cannot make it on their own. They are still determined to get into the water when it is troubled. Jesus can do nothing for them.

If indeed there are some here who identify with this man, and the Lord is saying to you as we go through this account, "Do you want to be healed?" you have to answer that question. If you say, "Not yet," or, "No, I don't," then there is nothing more for you; you may as well turn off your mind and not listen any further.

But this man at the pool of Bethesda wants to be healed. Notice his answer:

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 another steps down before me." {John 5:7 RSV}

In other words, "Yes, I want to be healed, but I cannot. I've tried, I've done everything I know how. I want to get into that water, I want to be healed, but I lack the ability; I've no one to help me. I've given up. I have no hope."

Many people here this morning are like that. They have given up on their situation, refusing to believe there is any hope it can change. They see no way, from a human viewpoint, so they have resigned themselves to being weak, failing and faltering Christians for the rest of their lives.

I know there are some like that among us; there always are. I do not know what your problem is. Maybe you have tried to stop drinking. You know that alcohol is ruining your life, your family, your home. You thought you had it under control. You tried to stop but you discovered you could not. It is amazing to me how many people casually feel they are in control of something that really has control of them. You have heard of the person who said, "It's easy to stop smoking. I've done it hundreds of times!" That is a revelation, of course, of how much it controls him.

Many of you have tried to stop taking drugs, but you discovered you are hooked; that a habit you began by innocent experimentation has got a hold of you although you want to stop. Maybe you have given up wrestling with an inner problem of lust, of reading pornography.

A young pastor told me recently that his problem was that he loved to read pornographic magazines -- a pastor! Outwardly he was giving the impression that he was one of God's men -- inwardly pure, living a lifestyle that was honoring to God -- but inwardly there was a giving way. He told me he could not pass a magazine store without going in and looking at filthy magazines, buying them and taking them home with him, hiding them. He told me he had tried to stop but he could not. "What will I do?" he asked me.

Perhaps you do not see any hope for your marriage. You have tried to correct things. You have asked for help but nobody seems to care; it only gets worse. Many people are right where this man was, with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness of making any change.

That brings us to the critical moment of this story. What did Jesus say to a man who had lost all hope, a man who had given up on himself? Did he say, "Oh, come on, I'll help you get into the pool the next time the water is troubled"? No, he did not say that. He did not offer that kind of help. He could have, but he did not. Did he say, "Hang on. Keep coming here. Perhaps some day you'll make it in time. Some day it will all work out. Some day you'll be right at the edge of the pool when it's troubled and all you'll have to do is fall in"? No, he did not say that either. Did he say, "Let's at least make you comfortable. Let's get you a new mattress to lie on, put a few flowers around you and bring you two meals a day"? No, he did not. These are the suggestions of men, what we say to people. But Jesus does not say any of those things to people who want to hear from him.

What does Jesus say, then? Notice carefully his method: First, he asks an impossible thing; secondly, he removes all possibility of a relapse; and thirdly, he expects a continued success. All these are involved in the words,

"Rise, take up your pallet, and walk." And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked. {John 5:8b-9a RSV}

Notice that the first thing Jesus says to do is what the man could not do, what he had tried for 38 years to do. On what basis does Jesus say these words to him? It is important to see that. Somehow this man senses what that basis was. Perhaps he was thinking, "If this man tells me to rise (and I cannot rise), it must mean that he intends to do something to make it possible." Thus his faith is transferred from his own efforts to Jesus: "He must do it. I can't." The man must also have reasoned somewhat along these lines, "If this man is going to help me then I have got to decide to do what he tells me to do."

That is a critical clue many miss when they are looking for help from God. There is always something God tells them to believe, and do, and act on. This is a word of action. Jesus does not say, "Try to build up faith in your mind. Try to fasten your thoughts on this or that." He tells them to do something: "Rise! Stand up!" Obviously it was Jesus' will that this man should do what he told him to do, and the moment the man's will agreed with the Lord's will the power was there. I do not know whether he felt anything or not. All I know is that strength came into his bones and into his muscles and he could stand. He knew he could stand, and he did.

Then what? The Lord did not merely say, "Rise," he said, "take up your pallet." Why did he say that? I like the way G. Campbell Morgan has put it, "In order to make no provision for a relapse." The man might have said to himself, "I'm healed, but I had better leave my bed here; I may need it tomorrow." If he had said that he would have been back in it the next day. But he did not. Jesus said, "Take up your bed. Get rid of it; don't leave it there."

In those words he is saying something very important to people who need to be healed: do not make any provision to go back on what you have done. Many people fail right here. Go home and pour out the alcohol! Go home and get rid of the drugs! Burn your bridges behind you. Say no to the friends who have been luring you on into evil. You will probably find that some of them will come back with you. Burn your bridges. Cut off any possibility of going back. Let somebody know the new stand you have taken so that he will help hold you to it. Burn your bridges, is what Jesus is saying. That is so important. Many a person has really been touched by God, delivered from some inner attitude, a bitter spirit or whatever, but then he has allowed the past to come back in again and he finds himself back where he was. Our Lord knows what he is talking about -- "take up your bed."

The third thing: "walk." Do not expect to be carried -- walk. Many people want to be carried after they are healed. They expect everybody to gather around them and keep them going -- a common area of failure. But if Jesus gives you the power to rise, Jesus is the One who can give you the power to walk every day, to keep going. That is an important thing to see -- you and the Lord. Your eyes not on your friends or on yourself, your eyes on him. "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of faith," {Heb 12:2 KJV}. That is how this man kept going.

John now traces the immediate reaction of others to this event:

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." But he answered them, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Take up your pallet, and walk.'" {John 5:9b-11 RSV}

Now the man is in trouble over the Sabbath restrictions. Here John starts to trace the beginning of the movement that ended in the death of Jesus, the beginning of the official rejection of the Messiah. This was introduced by what seemed to the leaders of the Jews, and probably everybody else too, to be a perfectly proper concern. The Law of Moses did say that the Jews were to keep the Sabbath and not do any work on that day. The rabbis had carefully studied that regulation, and, probably innocently and with good intentions, had spelled out 39 different ways by which the Sabbath could be violated by certain types of work. One of those ways was carrying any kind of a load on the Sabbath day. Jeremiah 17 had warned against this. He specifically said, "Do not bring any burden out of your houses on the sabbath day," {cf, Jer 17:22}. Thus there was some merit and justification for their intervention in this case.

But the real motive of their hearts is instantly revealed when the man says to them, "The man who healed me said to me, 'Take up your pallet, and walk.'" Their reaction, which you would think would be, "What? Somebody healed you? Who is the man who healed you?" was instead, "Who is the guy who told you to disobey one of our regulations?" This reveals them for the religious bigots they are, intent on the letter of the Law, but totally unconcerned about the mercy of God.

We see a lot of that around yet today. I was in Jerusalem in June of this year, and I decided to go to a cinema one evening, just as the Sabbath was drawing to a close. When I arrived at the theater there was a crowd of people outside but everything was in darkness, with no marquee lights showing. There was some commotion,

and I was told the Orthodox Jews had discovered that the theater was selling tickets just a few moments before the Sabbath ended. The Jews had protested loudly and threatened to stone the place because of what, in their estimation, was a violation of the Sabbath. So this type of thing is still going on -- 2,000 years after this incident in Jerusalem.

The man is in trouble. The Law said that anyone caught bearing a burden on the Sabbath was to be stoned. This punishment was not often carried out, but still the man is in real trouble. Notice that the minute this new believer gets in trouble, however, this man whom Jesus has touched, blessed and healed, Jesus is there. Verse 13:

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 befall you." {John 5:13-14 RSV}

That is a wonderful word, "Jesus found him." The man had gone to the temple because the Law required that one who had been healed had to make a thanksgiving offering. Jesus knew where to find him.

Notice the order of what Jesus said to him; it is very important. He did not say to the man, shaking his finger, "Sin no more. If you do you will lose your healing." No, he said, "See, you are made whole." Jesus never says, "Sin no more," unless he first says, "You are made whole." He calls the man's attention to the fact that not only had he been physically healed, he had been spiritually healed. His sins had been forgiven; he had been washed, he had been cleansed; he was a new man -- physically, spiritually and soulfully. To that person who has received the gift of wholeness from God, without any merit or earning on his part, to that person, Jesus says, "Sin no more."

That revealing word indicates what had been the trouble all along. What would cause a man to lie helpless for 38 years? It was because some sin was sapping the vitality of his life. Now, it is not always sin that makes people sick. There are other accounts in the Word of God that indicate sometimes it is the corporate sin of the whole lost race that produces sickness in an individual. We must remember, from the book of Job, that we are not to always blame the individual for his sickness. But sometimes -- and I think the individual always knows -- sickness is caused by sin he is involved in. We do not know what kind of sin this man had been committing. Perhaps it was a bitter spirit toward somebody. That will sap all the energy and vitality of life and turn one into an invalid. I have seen that happen. Perhaps it was a shameful habit he continually indulged in; an injury he had done to someone and he had refused to correct it. Our Lord reminds him that God is concerned about areas like that.

Paul puts this in a wonderful verse that everybody should remember: "Be not deceived [don't kid yourself]; God is not mocked," {Gal 6:7 KJV}. "For he who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption [injury, hurt, damage, heartache and sorrow will all come because God reads hearts]; but he that sows to the Spirit shall reap life [vitality, peace, love, joy, those good things that keep us whole]," {cf, Gal 6:8 RSV}. Our Lord raises a lamp of warning here; even being healed by Jesus will not guarantee that you will not have your problem return. "Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you."

John gives a final word about this incident in Verses 15-17:

The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. [He had to explain who it was had healed him, and he told them.] And this was why the Jews persecuted Jesus, because he did this on the sabbath. {John 5:15-16 RSV}

From here on this was their justification for their persecution of Jesus -- they could hide behind what looked like a violation of the Law. They had heaped all these regulations on the Sabbath law, but Jesus ignored them frequently because the regulations were "the tradition of men," {Mark 7:8}. Now they had an excuse that made their persecution of him look valid.

Jesus explains why he breaks the tradition:

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working still, and I am working." {John 5:17 RSV}

Jesus is saying, "You go back to Moses and to all that the rabbis have added to his Law. But I want to go back further than that: God is at work; God is doing this. The merciful and compassionate God has found this man. He is working and I am his instrument. That is why I am doing this." That is one of the most profound statements in the Gospel of John. The secret of meaning in any life is finding out what God is doing and working with him, thus you become an instrument of the moving of God through history.

What Jesus said is true for us today: God is working in this twentieth century. He is working in international events; he is working in the pressures and problems that come to each one of us; he is working in the very circumstance in which you find yourself today. What you need to know is, where is God moving in your life, and then work with him. Be his instrument. Allow it to endure. The only thing that lasts, that gives significance to life -- and every one of us wants to be significant -- is to be in line with what God does. Only God's work will last. All that men do will fall away to nothing. Even though it be religious work it will be nothing -- trash, crap, burned by fire. What God does is what will last.

This is the basis of one of the most profound discourses of our Lord, which follows this account.

Let us leave it now with this question that Jesus asks each one of us: "In some area of your life, do you want to be healed?" If you say, "Yes," he will say, "Then stand up, take up your bed, and walk."

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we have sensed this morning that we are here, like a great multitude lying by the pool of Bethesda, waiting to be healed; trying various ways and means, hoping somebody will help. We have not yet listened to that wonderful voice that says to us in the inner heart, "Rise, take up your bed, and walk." Grant that we will do so from this moment. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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