

# HE'S GOT THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS

by Ray C. Stedman

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In the fifth chapter of John's gospel we have been watching Jesus at the pool of Bethesda with a great multitude of blind, lame and paralyzed people. I have already drawn the spiritual parallel to that of a congregation on Sunday morning. There are many blind people present among us, people who cannot see where they are headed, who are stumbling on into disaster and they do not even know it. There are lame people here, those who cannot walk as they ought to. They know how, but they cannot seem to make themselves do it; instead they stumble, falter, and fall. There are paralyzed people here who want to do more than they are doing, but their wills seem to be in a grip they cannot break. They find themselves returning again and again to habits of thought and attitudes of mind which they know are wrong and hurtful.

Yet there are also people here who hear the voice of Jesus saying to them, "Rise, take up your bed, and walk. You do not have to be like this for I am standing in front of you saying these words to you." Almost certainly there are people here who will respond to that, and who will obey what Jesus says. They will find they have the power to be different.

When Jesus healed the impotent man at the pool of Bethesda he got into trouble because he chose the wrong day to do his healing. According to the rules of the Jews, no one was to do healing on the Sabbath day. Jesus got into trouble because, in the presence of human agony, God does not keep the Sabbath. Our Lord responded to a need and was called to account for that. In response, he explained to the Jews that he was going to keep on doing such things because it was the will of his Father; that he and the Father worked together.

Then he said something that must have challenged the whole thought pattern of the leaders and the crowd that was listening to him. His words challenge our hearts today as well: "Greater works than these will he (the Son) show you in order that you may marvel," {John 5:20b RSV}. What could be greater than the miracle of healing he had just performed?

We do not have to guess. That is where we begin our study this morning. In Verse 21 of Chapter 5 Jesus says what these "greater works" will be:

**For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. {John 5:21-23 RSV}**

When Jesus says, "the Father raises the dead" (and gives to the Son the same power), he is declaring the first of the "greater works" he is going to do: He has the power to give life to the dead. In the words, "the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son," he is saying that he is the final arbiter of human destiny; he is the One who determines where everybody will end up for eternity. He is the Judge, with all judgment in his hands.

When our Lord speaks of "the dead" (Verse 21), we have to ask: Does he mean the spiritually dead or the physically dead? In Verses 24-27 he deals specifically with spiritual death. People who never think about their accountability to God are spiritually dead. People who never make any response to the things of God, who do not believe in the invisible realities of life but deal only with the material and the visible -- who believe that their existence is bounded by the womb and the tomb -- those people are spiritually dead. They are unaware and unresponsive to anything beyond what appeals to the body and the soul. That is spiritual death. Jesus has the power to give life to such people. But in Verses 28-30 he is talking about the physically dead, "those who are in the graves." He claims he has power to give them life also. Thus both forms of death are included in the statement of Verse 21.

We have great difficulty today understanding how the words of Jesus sounded to those who heard him on that day. These are amazing claims. When you read them, you are forced to conclude that Jesus was one of three things -- either

1. He was a lunatic, a madman, suffering from delusions of grandeur; or
2. He was a liar, a deceiver trying to pass himself off as something he was not, or,
3. He is Lord of life, he holds all life in his hands.

There are no other alternatives.

The claim of Jesus is that life belongs to him. He only loans it, for a while, to us. Think of that! It cuts right across the philosophy and the propaganda of our day! Television, radio, newspapers and magazines tell you that your life belongs to you, and you can do with it what you want; it is up to you to make of yourself whatever you desire. That is what is fed to us all the time. But that is a lie! Your life is not yours. You did not invent it, you were handed it, you were given it. One of these days you will have to give it back. Those two great facts underscore all of life, yet how easy it is to forget them.

How frequently the world tries to operate on a basis that is not true, that life belongs to us, and it will go on as long as we want it to! One of the reasons we gather here Sunday after Sunday is that we might counteract that lie and remind ourselves afresh that many of the things that are being said to us by the world are not true, they are not based on reality. Sooner or later, an exciting, compelling, terrifying reality is going to crash in upon us and we will have to deal with life the way it really is. That is what this claim of Jesus states. He claims not only to possess the power to give physical life, but spiritual life as well.

"Spiritual" life is what the Bible calls "eternal" life. It is a different level of life. It is not merely, as it is frequently translated (especially in the King James version), "everlasting" life. That conveys the idea that this present, earthly life will be extended infinitely. But that is not what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of "spiritual" or "eternal" life. It is rather describing a quality of life. It is true that it goes on forever, but primarily the Bible is talking about the richness, the fullness, the beauty of life. It is a quality of life that is enduring, true, but it is also enriching; it cannot be diminished by circumstances or ended by death. It is a quality of life that is given to us now. It begins here, not in heaven after you die. The claim of Jesus is that he alone has the power to give that kind of life.

Because Jesus gives "to whom he will," that makes him also the arbiter of the destiny of human beings: He is the Judge of all men. It is his knowledge of who is to receive eternal life, and who is to remain without it, that constitutes him an infallible Judge of human destiny. These two ideas blend together; one grows out of the other. If Jesus gives you life you are on your way to heaven. If he gives you eternal life you will never die, you will never taste the emptiness and awful loneliness of death. You will immediately have a fuller experience of life than you have ever had before. But only if Jesus gives it to you. He is the sole possessor of spiritual life.

If he does not give you life then you remain exactly the way you were, on your way to hell, on your way to frustration, torment, hollowness -- all those negative things the Scripture means when it speaks of hell -- life without God, without blessing, without richness, without fullness.

If this claim of Jesus is, real it clearly makes him the most important Person in anybody's life. If your very physical existence has come from him, and your spiritual destiny is in his hands, then he is the most important Person you will ever have to deal with. More than that, he is the most important Person in the whole world, the central figure in all the universe. This is stated all through the Scriptures.

In the last book of the Bible, which was also written by the Apostle John, there is a tremendous scene described in Chapter 5, where John takes us beyond the limits of earth and shows us the throne of God. The creatures of heaven are gathered around the throne, worshipping God, and in the center of the scene John sees a Lamb that has been slain. Here is his description:

**Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the**

voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped. {Rev 5:11-14 RSV}

There is Jesus, sitting at the heart of the universe. Because of this, no Christian can ever put Jesus Christ on a par with Mohammed, Buddha, Mahatma Ghandi, the virgin Mary, Moses, the prophets, or any religious leader of any time. This is why we cannot call a Christian one who only accepts the teachings of Jesus, or who adopts his moral standards, or admires him as a social reformer or religious leader. Jesus himself does not allow us that privilege. He is above all of this. He alone has the right to give the gift of eternal life. In his first letter, John has written of him, "This is the record, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life, but he who does not have the Son of God does not have life," {1 Jn 5:11-12}. The relationship you have to Jesus Christ is the most important relationship of your life. It determines your ultimate destiny.

If that is true, the great question before us is, "To whom and on what terms does Jesus give eternal life?" The answer to that is given in one of the greatest verses in Scripture, Verse 24. It is one of my favorite texts, one I have used many, many times. I hope you will memorize these words of Jesus,

**Truly, truly, I say to you [remember, that introduction in effect underlines the words that follow, calling attention to the importance of them], he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. {John 5:24 RSV}**

That verse makes clear that when Jesus says he gives life "to whom he will," it is not a matter of arbitrary selection on his part. He does not point at people in a capricious way, and say, "You and you and you can have eternal life," and so on. It is clear there is a responsibility we are to fulfill.

To whom does Jesus give eternal life? To the man or woman, boy or girl who "hears his words and believes in Him who sent him," to the one who is willing to listen to his claims, believe his credentials, and act on that basis, to follow him and be his obedient disciple. When one hears his words and obeys what he says, notice what happens: immediately Jesus says he "has eternal life;" not, he "shall have" it some day when he dies. He has it, right then. Immediately also all judgment is past. Such a one has "passed from death to life." Our Lord is making very clear to these Jews and to everyone else who reads his words the terms on which one passes from death to life.

All of us are born headed for death. We do not like to talk about it, we put it away from our thoughts as long as possible, but we are all headed for death. Beyond death lies the second death -- unless we have eternal life. Thus the most important question anybody has to settle is whether he has believed in Jesus and received from his hand the gift of eternal life.

In Verse 25 Jesus extends this well into the future:

**"Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead [the spiritually dead] will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself," {John 5:25-26 RSV}**

What does Jesus mean by the words, "the hour is coming"? This is a clear reference to the Day of Pentecost, to the new thing that would happen when the Spirit of God would come in a new, fresh way and this gift of eternal life would be given to Jews and Gentiles alike all over the world and through all the succeeding periods of time. Already the "hour" of which Jesus speaks is over 1900 years long. During that time whoever hears his word and believes on him who sent him receives eternal life.

But, Jesus also says, "it now is," i.e., it was already happening. By those words he is referring to his own giving to individuals of the gift of life. We have already seen this in John's gospel. Nicodemus, the troubled religious leader, came by night to Jesus in an effort to find peace. Jesus said to him, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up [on a cross], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life," {John 3:15 RSV}. Nicodemus believed and received the gift of eternal life. The Samaritan woman at the well, who was living such an empty life, trying to find satisfaction in five husbands, hoping marriage would satisfy her yearnings, came empty, hungry, and thirsty to Jesus. To her he said, "If you knew who is speaking to you, you would have asked of him and he would have given you a well of water springing up to eternal life," {cf, John 4:10 RSV}. Thus he gave her eternal life. She went away so excited she could not contain herself, but soon brought the whole town out to hear this One who could give the gift of eternal life.

So it was already happening, "the hour is coming, and now is," when the spiritually dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. Then he adds that as the Son of God, as the One who is eternally with the Father, he has always had this ability to give life to the spiritually dead. He has this life "in Himself." He is the One who has always given eternal life, in the Old Testament as well as the New.

But now he adds something else. Verse 27:

**"and [the Father] has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man." {John 5:27 RSV}**

In other words, because he has now become a man and understands how we live, how we feel and what we face, he has the right to pass judgment on whether we should have the gift of life or remain in death. It is because Jesus came among us that he understands us. He knows the pressures and the problems we face, therefore he knows clearly when we have reached the place where we are ready to give up depending on ourselves and are able to receive the gift of life.

Last week a young man was released from San Quentin prison. He is Archie Fain, a murderer and a rapist. In 1967 he murdered in cold blood a young football player and raped the two girls who were with him, in a terrible crime that shocked the whole community. He was tried and convicted and put in prison to serve his sentence. When it was announced that he was being paroled there was a hue and cry against letting a murderer and a rapist like that loose in society again, so much so that for a while Archie Fain's parole was denied. But the denial was eventually overridden by the Supreme Court.

I read this week an account by a newspaper reporter who several years ago became interested in this man's case and spent hours talking with him. The reporter understood that Archie Fain was now a Christian, that somehow he had found Christ in prison; that Jesus had given him the gift of eternal life. In the account I read, the reporter put it this way, "The man who was released the other day is not the same man who was put into prison." And he surely is not. All through the time of his parole denial he was patient and did not complain. He waited upon God to work out the circumstances of his life to give him a new hope and a new chance.

To receive the gift of life is the only way by which a man can be permanently changed, whether he has a black record or not. The only thing that can transform us right at the very heart of our being, and make us new again, is the gift of eternal life. Those who have it can never be the same again. The growth process can sometimes be very painful, as many of us know, but, when the gift of life is there at the heart of our being, we can never go back to what we once were. That life is in God's Son.

But all physical life is also in his hands. Verse 28:

**"Do not marvel at this [What does that tell you about what they were doing? They were agog with astonishment that he would speak like this. Their mouths dropped open at the daring claims he made.]; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.**

**I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me," {John 5:28-30 RSV}**

What a marvelous claim! Jesus says there is coming an hour in history when all the dead, all of them -- bad, good, evil, kind, loving, unloving, murderers, rapists -- all, shall come forth from the grave. He is going to empty the cemeteries of the world. Then, even the bodies of men and women will share in their final destiny.

Those who have "done good" shall experience the resurrection of life. What does "done good" mean? Many people extract this verse from the context and make up their own ideas about what it means to "do good." They say if you have been fairly nice to your neighbor, do not beat your wife too often, speak kindly to people now and then, and try your best to obey the Ten Commandments, then perhaps the good you have done will outweigh the evil and God will let you into heaven.

But that is not what this verse is saying. This is just a few verses removed from what Jesus said about the gift of eternal life. To "do good," of course, means to have received eternal life. Only those in whom the life of God is dwelling can "do good" in God's eyes. In the words of an old hymn,

He died that we might be forgiven,  
He died to make us good;  
That we might go at last to heaven,  
Saved by His precious blood.

Those who have obeyed his word, walked in fellowship with him and shared his life -- those are the ones who have "done good."

What does "done evil" mean? Obviously this is referring to those who have refused his life, turned their backs on truth, and shut their ears to the offer of grace from God; those who have denied even the witness of nature, the witness of their own inner hearts. Those are the ones who have all their life "done evil" even though there were times when they thought they were doing good. They will come forth to the "resurrection of judgment."

C. S. Lewis has a very helpful quotation here:

God is going to invade this earth in force. But what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream, and something else -- something it never entered your head to conceive -- comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us, and so terrible to others, that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature.

It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we have really chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back, to give us that chance. It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.

That is clearly the import of the words of Jesus. No wonder he frightened and challenged the people who heard him on that day, as he frightens and challenges us when we hear his words today.

But note his assurance in Verse 30:

**"I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just..."  
{John 5:30a RSV}**

There will be no argument against his judgment, no one can complain that it is unfair, because it is the work of both the Father and the Son; the Father who gave us life to begin with and who knows all that is in our hearts; the Son who came among us and knows how we feel and is both our Savior and Judge. We decide which he is going to be by the reaction we have to truth.

I want to close with another quote, this time from the pen of A. W. Tozer:

The teaching of the New Testament is that now, at this very moment, there is a Man in heaven appearing in the presence of God for us. He is as certainly a man as was Adam or Moses or Paul; he is a man glorified, but his glorification did not de-humanize him. Today he is a real man, of the race of mankind, bearing our lineaments and dimensions, a visible and audible man, whom any other man would recognize instantly as one of us.

But more than this, he is the heir of all things, Lord of all lords, head of the church, firstborn of the new creation. He is the way to God, the life of the believer, the hope of Israel, and the high priest of every true worshiper. He holds the keys of death and hell, and stands as advocate and surety for everyone who believes on him in truth. Salvation comes not by accepting the finished work, or deciding for Christ; it comes by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, the whole, living, victorious Lord who, as God and man, fought our fight and won it, accepted our debt as his own and paid it, took our sins and died under them, and rose again to set us free. This is the true Christ; nothing less will do.

How clearly those wonderful words define what our Lord is saying here. We sing it in the familiar spiritual, *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* :

He's got you and me, brother, in His hands,  
He's got you and me, sister, in His hands.  
He's got the little tiny baby in His hands,  
He's got the whole world in His hands.

He holds our destiny in his hands.

If there is someone here who has not yet received life from Jesus, now is the time to do so. While we sing you can hear his words, believe on him, and commit yourself to his grace.

Give yourself to Jesus and he will give you the gift of eternal life.

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