

Three challenges at Bethesda

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[0 : 0 0] The words for meditation for a short time this evening you will find in the Gospel according to John. The Gospel according to John chapter 5 and we might read again at verse 5. John chapter 5 reading from verse 5. And a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty and eight years. When Jesus saw him lie and knew that he had been now a long time in that case he saith unto him wilt thou be made whole? The impotent man answered him sir I have no man when the water is troubled to put me into the pool but while I am coming another step is down before me. Jesus saith unto him rise take up thy bed and walk. And immediately the man was made whole and took up his bed and walked and on the same day it was the

Sabbath. Jesus saith unto him wilt thou be made whole?

It was a pitiable sight which met the eye of our Lord when on this occasion he came to the pool of Bethesda.

Bethesda in all probability was one of several thermal springs which were in the city of Jerusalem and which appeared to have certain curative powers.

And that power seemed to be manifest in a greater degree to a greater degree on certain occasions. And so it was only natural that around Bethesda there should be found gathered large numbers of people who were sick.

[2 : 1 4] People who were suffering from different kinds of diseases and they came there in the hope that their disease was going to be cured.

It was believed that the first person who stepped in after there was this movement in the thermal water it was believed that the first person who stepped in would be made whole.

And so as I say there was a large crowd gathered there. But among them was a man who had been there much longer than any of them.

He had lain there for a period of 38 years. And so it was to this man that Jesus directed his attention.

And as he directed his attention to this man, as he singled him out from the rest of the crowd, he addressed to him three challenges.

[3 : 1 9] First of all, there was a challenge to his will. Wiltst thou be made whole?

And then there was a challenge to his faith. To the man who had lain there for 38 years, he said, Rise, take up thy bed and walk.

And finally, there was a challenge to his conscience. Go, he said, and sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon thee.

And so let us direct our thoughts very briefly and very simply this evening to the three challenges with which that man was faced.

Jesus directed his attention to him. And when he spoke to him, he asked him a question which on the face of it seemed to be a very strange question to ask of a sick man.

[4 : 3 1] He said to him, Do you want to be made whole? Surely there was no point in asking a sick person if he wanted to be made whole.

Particularly a man who had lain there for a long period of 38 years. But you see, God never asks any needless questions.

He has a purpose in every question which he directs to the sons and to the daughters of men. When he said to Adam in the garden after the fall, Adam, where art thou?

God knew perfectly well where Adam was. He knew that he was seeking to hide from him among the trees in the garden. But yet God directed this question to him in order that Adam might be brought face to face with his sins.

Face to face with his predicament. And Adam had to acknowledge that he had done wrong. And when God spoke to Elijah, Elijah who had gone into the desert, following his wonderful triumph on Mount Carmel, when the prophets of Baal were slain, when the heavenly fire came down, when poor Elijah thought that there was going to be a revival, and the revival didn't come about, despite the fact that the people had shouted out, The Lord, he is the God, the Lord, he is the God.

[6 : 08] In a short time they'd forgotten about it altogether. And when Elijah heard that Jezebel wanted to kill him, he was despondent. He gave way to despair.

And he went away yonder into the wilderness and he requested that he might die. God said to him, What are you doing here, Elijah? God knew what he was doing there.

God knew the disappointment that was in his heart. God knew the weariness of body and mind that he had, after the experience that he had passed through.

But again he wanted to challenge him with the path of duty. Elijah, this is not the place for you. Your work is not finished.

You've got to go back to the post of duty. What are you doing here? Forget about it. And then too, when Jesus said to the woman, That poor woman who was so timid that she dared not make her presence known to Jesus, but who came and with a touch of faith touched the hem of his garment, believing that if she did so she would be made whole, and her faith was not misplaced.

[7 : 24] Jesus then did something which seemed to be very strange, almost cruel. He said, Who touched me? A strange question to ask. The disciples said, Lord, there must literally have been scores of people who touched you.

But Jesus knew that there was one touch which was different from every other touch. It was the touch of faith. And what he wanted to do in effect, was to bring that woman, not only to realize that she had been cured, but to realize that she owed a debt of gratitude to the one who had cured her.

He wanted her to make a public profession of her faith. And everybody knew what had happened. They knew that a great cure had been effected.

You see, God often works in a strange way. Didn't Jesus work in a strange way? When he received word that Lazarus, Lazarus his dear friend in Bethany was sick, and one would naturally have expected that as soon as he received word that Lazarus was sick, he would have gone to that home in Nazareth in order that he might cure him.

Or because he was so powerful, he might even have taken action from the spot where he was, so that Lazarus would be cured. But yet we read, and it makes strange reading, when Jesus heard that Lazarus was sick, he abode still two days in the place where he was.

[8 : 54] Strange conduct, you say, for a friend, and so it was. But there was a purpose behind it, because God, Jesus, was going to perform a more wonderful miracle than any of the others which he had performed up to that time.

And so he has a purpose behind this question. Wilt thou be made whole? How did this question appeal to the man?

Why was it directed to him? I suggest that first of all, it was destined to shake off the apathy of the years, and to revive his hopes.

It could well be that after having waited there for so long, this man gave up all hope of ever being cured. Year after year passed, and he saw others cured, that he was still there, and nothing had happened.

Nothing to give him any hope at all. And so Jesus faced him up with the question, Wilt thou be made whole? Was this a door of hope opening?

[10 : 10] Was this the opportunity he had been waiting for? Perhaps it was. But I wonder if there was another reason for that question. Was it because the man had become so accustomed to his illness, or to his infirmity, that he really didn't want to be cured?

You see, he made a living out of going to the Pool of Bethesda, staying at the Pool of Bethesda. He, along with others, and he no doubt after all that time had the most prominent place.

He was a beggar. And while he wouldn't make a fortune, yet he was able to keep body and soul together, and he became so accustomed to it, that he had no desire for anything better.

That might have been a possibility. Because he realized that if he was made whole, he wasn't going to receive the sympathy of the crowd any longer.

He was going to have to earn his own living, and that wasn't going to be easy after what we might call 38 years unemployment. And so he was content to remain in this rut, so to speak, and not to have any aspirations.

[11 : 31] And so Jesus puts it to him quite straightforwardly. Do you really want to be made whole? Do you really want to be cured?

Do you know, my friends, there is a tremendous lesson for us here. First of all, a lesson of hope.

For those who for a long time may have been seeking for spiritual blessing, longing for an outpouring of God's Spirit, waiting for the time when something was going to take place in their lives, something which would give them new hope and new strength as they went forward into the future.

And they've been waiting so long and it never seems to come. Jesus says, Do you want to be made whole? Now is your opportunity.

I'm here. I can deal with the situation. I can bring you new hope. I can bring you new life. Or again, is it possible that like the blind beggar, you have been coming to the house of God, some of you for more than 38 years, and you have got into this religious routine, and you're not looking or expecting anything more than that.

[13 : 06] You're there. And even as the man had his story, you see, he didn't, he didn't answer the question of Jesus directly. He didn't say to begin with at least, Yes, I want to be whole, made whole.

No, he started making an excuse. He said, Sir, he said, I have no man when the water is troubled to put me into the pool, but while I am coming another step is down before me. He'd become accustomed to this.

And he had his story. He was making his excuses. And I wonder, my friend, I wonder what excuse you have tonight, you who have been coming for so long to the house of God, why your heart has never been opened to receive the Lord Jesus Christ.

In other words, why you have not been made spiritually whole after all those years. Oh, you say, but I can't make myself spiritually whole.

Of course you can't make yourself spiritually whole. No person who ever lived has been able to make himself or herself spiritually whole. But there is one who can make you spiritually whole.

[14 : 24] The good physician can deal with your disease, with your condition, and he can bring you new health, spiritual health and spiritual vitality. And the wonderful thing is that he can do it tonight.

Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. Here was Jesus at the pool of Bethesda. It was the man's chance of a lifetime. And he had to make up his mind.

And my friend, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by tonight in the everlasting gospel. And he's asking you, Do you want new life?

New vitality? New power? New strength? So that you need no longer be a beggar dependent upon the world, but someone who has a life to live, to the praise and to the glory of God?

Will thou be made whole? Do you want to be cured? Do you want Christ to come into your life?

[15 : 33] A challenge to his will. But there was also a challenge to faith. It would appear that the man must have expressed his willingness to be made whole.

Because Jesus then said to him, He said, Rise, he said, And take up thy bed and walk. What an impossible situation, you say.

A man who for 38 years has lain down and hasn't been able to walk. And now this person says to him, Rise and take up your bed and walk. A sheer impossibility.

But there was a response of faith. There must have been a response of faith. And that man must have appreciated the fact that this man, this stranger who said to him, Rise, take up thy bed and walk, was challenging him to do something that he hadn't done for so long.

And he made his effort. And wonder of wonders. He walked. Yes. He walked.

[16 : 51] You see, that's what the power of God can do. People who have been absolutely useless in the spiritual situation, in the spiritual sense.

Men, and we are all in this category by nature, men who are dead in trespasses and sins. And Jesus says to them, Take up your bed and walk.

And by God's grace, they have been able to respond to the challenge. You remember the man who had the withered hand. He was in exactly the same position.

Stretch out thine hand, said Jesus. And he might reasonably have been expected to answer. But Lord, he said, he could say, I can't stretch out my hand.

If you ask me to stretch out my leg, I can do it. If you ask me to turn my head, I can do it. But to stretch out my hand is a sheer impossibility. It's dead.

[18 : 08] Stretch out thine hand, said Jesus. And as he did it, the power was there. You see, that's the faith which I was trying to speak about this morning. That faith which makes us believe that we have to be born by God.

And when we are born by God, that new power, that new vitality comes into our lives. Whereby we are able to obey his commands.

Whereby we are able to overcome. You remember the faith which Abraham had. Abraham, when at the bidding of God, was commanded to take his son.

The child of promise. The one whom he never expected to have. The one around all whom all his hopes were built. The one around whom God had given him promises. And he said, Isaac, he said, take thy son and offer him up for a sacrifice.

What a test of his faith when he went up Mount Moriah. And when the young lad said to him, Father, haven't we forgotten something?

[19 : 22] We have the materials for making the sacrifice, for building the altar, for lighting the fire. But the most important thing of all is not here. Where is the lamb?

And in an act of faith, Abraham said, God will provide the lamb. Or remember Moses, when Moses was called upon to identify himself with the people of God.

Moses who had been brought up in the court of Egypt with all its luxury and with all its easy living. And he received the command. And in faith, he went forward as the leader of God's people.

You see, God never asks us to do anything without giving us the strength to perform it. I know that we can't help ourselves.

We know that we cannot save our own souls for salvation is of the Lord. But yet he gives to us this challenge. He brings us face to face with the real situation.

[20 : 32] Do you really want to be made whole? Or do you want to live on in the manner in which you have been living? Without God or at best with a form of religion which is dead and cold and meaningless.

A challenge to faith. And then finally, we have here a challenge to conscience. Go, says Christ, and sin no more.

That would seem to indicate, would it not, that in all probability his infirmity may have been the result of sin. Now, it is always dangerous to say that infirmities are the result of sin.

They sometimes may be. If we abuse our bodies, we pay the consequence. But at other times, God can bring affliction. He can bring distress in order that his own gracious purposes may be worked out.

But here it would seem to indicate that this man had been abusing his body. And as a result of that, he found himself in this plight. And Jesus said to him, go, he said, and sin no more.

[21 : 54] Go and sin no more. And whenever anybody saw that man walking about, they would have proof of the power of God.

They would remember that memorable day at the pool of Bethesda. And many people must have seen him there over the 38 years. And there he would be a living example of the power of God.

And isn't that exactly what happens when a life is changed? All things are passed away. All things are become new.

The deadness, the coldness, and the formality in our religion is a thing of the past. And our religion becomes vital and vibrant and meaningful to us. As we go forward in the strength of the Lord God.

And the professing Christian is challenged by these words. His life is to show forth the reality of the profession which he makes.

[23 : 03] And to display the glory of God. The glory of God. Go, he said, and sin no more.

It is true, of course, in our religious experience. That when we are born of the Spirit of God. He who begins the good work will complete it.

What a comfort that is. If we were to depend on our own inner feelings. How insecure a thing our religion would be.

How poor a thing our hope would be. But it's something which is guaranteed by God himself. Kept by the power of God. And to salvation.

But that does not mean to say that the Christian does not sin. He doesn't lose his salvation. But you remember that prayer. That vital prayer of the psalmist. Restore, he said unto me, the joy of thy salvation.

[24 : 06] You see, salvation should be a joyful experience. And yet how often we lose that joy. Through our apathy. Through our lack of desire to be in the presence of God.

Through our lack of service for his kingdom. And we become the most miserable creatures on earth. Go and sin no more, says God. Or you'll lose that joy.

And if we have lost that joy. Then the prayer of the psalmist becomes more real to us. Restore unto me, O Lord. The joy of thy salvation.

Wilt thou be made whole. Wilt thou be made whole. I want everybody present to answer that question tonight.

To answer it in the presence of God. Because you see, the good physician himself is here. And he's offering you spiritual healing. He's offering you hope.

[25 : 11] He's offering you salvation. He's offering you salvation. But he says, are you willing? Wilt thou be made whole?

And then he presents that challenge to our faith. If you really want to be made whole. Then there must be some action on your part. Rise and take up your bed.

Forget the old trappings which kept you bound to the world. Throw off the shackles. Rise above them and in the strength and in the name of the Lord go forward. And show forth his praise and his glory in your life.

And remember this. There's a challenge also to conscience. Even though we have that wonderful response of faith. The evil one won't leave us alone.

He'll try to tempt us. He'll try to bring us into sin. He'll try to bring dishonor upon the name and upon the cause of Christ through his people. Go and sin no more.

[26 : 19] Live by faith in the Son of God. And that is the secret. Because it is he who gives the power. And it is he who gives the strength. May he heal you.

And may he keep you. And at the end of the day. May he present you faultless. Before the presence of his glory. With exceeding joy.

Let us pray. O Lord our God. We thank thee for thy word.

We thank thee for the lessons which we learn from it. From the experience which we gain through the experience of others. And as we have been thinking of this wonderful story.

Of this great miracle which thou didst perform in the days of thy flesh. May we indeed remember that thy hand is not shortened. That it cannot save.

[27 : 24] Thou art still able to raise the sick to health. Thou art still able to bring new life. To those who are dead in trespasses and in sins.

And so O Lord we pray that thou wilt work out thine own gracious purposes in our lives. Help us to face up to the challenge which thou dost present to us. And by thy grace help us so to order our lives.

That they shall be lived. To the praise and to the glory of thy great name. We ask this. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Amen.