

Week 33: WHEN WE ARE OUT OF CHOICES

For the longest time, the story didn't make sense to me. It's about a man who had barely enough faith to stand on, but Jesus treated him as if he'd laid his son on the altar for God. Martyrs and apostles deserve such honor, but not some pauper who didn't know Jesus when he saw him. Or so I thought.

For the longest time, I thought Jesus was too kind. I thought the story was too bizarre. I thought the story was too good to be true. Then I realized something. This story isn't about an invalid in Jerusalem. This story is about you. It's about me. The fellow isn't nameless. He has a name—yours. He has a face—mine. He has a problem—just like ours.

Jesus encountered the man near a large pool north of the temple in Jerusalem. A colonnade with five porches overlooks the body of water. It's a monument of wealth and prosperity, but its residents are people of sickness and disease. It's called Bethesda. It could be called Central Park, Metropolitan Hospital, or even Joe's Bar and Grill. It could be the homeless huddled beneath a downtown overpass. It could be any collection of hurting people.

An underwater spring caused the pool to bubble occasionally. The people believed the bubbles were caused by the dipping of angels' wings. They also believed the first person to touch the water after the angel did would be healed. Did healing occur? I don't know. But I do know crowds of invalids came to give it a try.

On this day, Jesus must have sighed often as he walked along the poolside of Bethesda . . . and he sighed when he comes to you and me. Remember, I said I found our faces in the Bible. Here we are, filling the white space between the letters of John 5:5: "A man was lying there who had been sick for thirty-eight years" (NCV).

Maybe you don't like being described like that. Perhaps you'd rather find yourself in the courage of David or the devotion of Mary. But before we can be like them, we must admit we are like the paralytic. Invalids out of options. Can't walk. Can't work. Can't care for ourselves. Can't even roll down the bank to the pool to cash in on the angel water.

You may be holding this book with healthy hands and reading with strong eyes. You can't imagine what you and this four-decade invalid have in common. How could he be you? Simple: you share the same predicament and hope. What predicament? It is described in Hebrews 12:14: "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." That's our predicament: only the holy will see God. Holiness is a prerequisite to heaven. Perfection is a requirement for eternity.

We wish it weren't so. We act like it isn't so. We act like those who are "decent" will see God. Sounds right to us, but it doesn't sound right to God—and he sets the standard. And the standard is high. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). In God's plan, God is the standard for perfection. We don't compare ourselves to others; they are just as fouled up as we are. The goal is to be like him. Anything less is inadequate.

That's why the invalid is you and me. We, like the invalid, are paralyzed. We, like the invalid, are trapped. We, like the invalid, are stuck. We have no solution for our predicament.

When it comes to healing our spiritual condition, we don't have a chance. We might as well be told to pole-vault the moon. We don't have what it takes to be healed. Our only hope is that God will do for us what he did for the man at Bethesda—that he will step out of the temple and step into our ward of hurt and helplessness. Which is exactly what he has done.

Read Paul's description of what God has done for you: "When you were spiritually dead because of your sins and because you were not free from the power of your sinful self, God made you alive with Christ, and he forgave all our sins. He canceled the debt, which listed all the rules we failed to follow. He took away that record with its rules and nailed it to the cross. God stripped the spiritual rulers and powers of their authority. With the cross, he won the victory and showed the world that they were powerless" (Colossians 2:13-15 NCV).

Let's isolate some phrases. First, look at your condition: "When you were spiritually dead . . . and . . . you were not free." The invalid was better off than we are. At least he was alive. Paul says that if you and I are outside of Christ, then we are dead. Spiritually dead. Corpses. Lifeless. Cadavers. Dead. What can a dead person do? Not much.

But look what God can do with the dead: "God made you alive . . . forgave all our sins . . . canceled the debt . . . stripped the spiritual rulers . . . won the victory."

God's efforts are strongest when our efforts are useless.

Go back to Bethesda for a moment. Look at the brief but revealing dialogue between the paralytic and the Savior. Before Jesus healed him, he asked him a question: "Do you want to be well?" (John 5:6 NCV). The man replied, "Sir, there is no one to help me get into the pool when the water starts moving. While I am coming to the water, someone else always gets in before me" (verse 7 NCV).

Was the fellow complaining? Feeling sorry for himself? Or just stating the facts? Who knows. But before we think about it too much, look what happens next. "Jesus said, 'Stand up. Pick up your mat and walk.' And immediately the man was well" (verses 8-9 NCV).

I wish we would do that; I wish we would take Jesus at his word. I wish that we would learn that when he says something, it happens. What is this peculiar paralysis that confines us? What is this stubborn unwillingness to be healed? When Jesus tells us to stand, let's stand.

Is this your story? It can be. All the elements are the same. A gentle stranger has stepped into your hurting world and offered you a hand. Now it's up to you to take it.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

- All of humanity is in the same predicament: only the holy will see God.
- The goal is to be like God . . . anything less is simply inadequate.
- The power of God can bring the spiritually dead back to life.
- Jesus has offered you his hand, but it's up to you to reach out and take it.

MEMORY VERSE

Your memory verse for this unit is 2 Corinthians 12:9. Take a few moments to review this verse, and then write it out from memory in the space below.

The Heart of Jesus

He was at his usual station, near a clump of shrubbery that gave him some relief from the heat. His mat was spread, and he sat cross-legged. He listened for the sound of hooves, the shuffle of feet, the plodding of camels, and then he would beg. Most folks never really saw him. Others turned their heads at his voice and were moved by compassion. They would drop a few coins into his bowl or offer him a bit of food or drink before moving along.

Then one morning, he heard the clamor of many voices. There seemed to be a parade going by—so many feet, so many voices. “What is this? What’s going on?” he asked those nearest him. “I can see,” commented another beggar nearby, “Jesus of Nazareth and his followers. They are passing by.” The blind beggar paused for only a moment and then began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Again and again he called, as loudly as he could. Some of the others began to reprimand him. But the beggar did not stop, and Jesus turned his head. “Bring him to me,” Jesus said.

So the blind beggar found himself trembling in the presence of the Son of God. “What do you want me to do for you?” he asked. Should he ask for bread? Should he ask for wine? Should he ask for a few coins? No. This was not some passing merchant. He faced the one who had the power to give even more. “I want to see,” the beggar pleaded. Touched by the man’s faith, Jesus touched him. Sight was restored, and God received the praise (see Luke 18:38–43).

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

READ: JOHN 5:1-15 AND ROMANS 7:14-25

1. Jesus traveled to the city of Jerusalem to attend a festival (likely the feast of Purim). What did he encounter when he went to the pool of Bethesda (see John 5:1-5)?
2. When Jesus saw a man lying there, he asked, "Do you want to get well?" (verse 6). Why do you think Jesus asked this question? How did the man respond (see verse 7)?
3. How did the Jewish religious leaders react when they learned that Jesus had healed the man on the Sabbath? What did the man say to them (see verses 8-11)?
4. When it comes to healing your spiritual condition . . . you don't have a chance. What does Paul say about the futility of living in your own strength (see Romans 7:14-17)?
5. Paul states that he has the desire to do what is good but cannot carry it out. What instead does he do? What does this indicate to him (see verses 18-20)?
6. The condition of all people is that they are each "a prisoner of the law of sin" (verse 23). What does Paul say is the only solution to this dilemma (see verses 24-25)?
7. The paralyzed man trusted Jesus and was healed. What do the passages you've studied this week reveal about trusting God for your healing—whether physical or spiritual?