

## Getting Over It; Moving On

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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### **“Do you want to be made well?”**

~ Jesus: John 5:6

Thirty-eight years is a long time to be sick, especially when a life-span in New Testament times may not have been much more than about 50 years. Had the fellow in the story been sick from birth? Or did he get sick, perhaps, as a child? Either way, he probably didn't have much time left. So we can easily see how discouraging the situation was for this poor man at the Pool of Bethesda. But we should not jump to the conclusion that he been there, at the pool, for a long time. In fact he might have come there only recently, and then realized the problem he described. If so the story doesn't necessarily represent a stubborn or persistent discouragement, or a negative attitude, as some have assumed. The man was there, after all, because it was a place for healing. He must have had some shred of hope, however thin.

So when the Lord asked him, “Do you want to be made well,” it could appear to be insulting, as if one of us might ask a clinically depressed person, “Do you want to be happy?” ***Of course he wants to be happy! That's the whole problem! There just doesn't seem to be any help for it.***

But the question in the Lord's case is far from insulting. And the case is very far from a clinical depression. The story is indeed about a natural “infirmity” or weakness, but in the spiritual sense it is about a spiritual weakness, and since the Lord already knows the answer He is really only asking the man to look more deeply into his heart. And so on that deeper level He is asking *us* to consider *our* ruling loves. For the “man” in the story represents every man, but especially the thinking or intellectual aspect of any man – or woman – and it behooves us all to think deeply about what motivates us and what we really want out of life!

Note, too, that the Pool of Bethesda is not just an incidental location – mentioned in connection with sheep – for it, too, represents something spiritual, namely the pool of truths stored up in our memories in states of innocence or good. “Bethesda” literally means House of Mercy, and the fact that the pool had five porches rather conspicuously reminds us of the five senses through which we take in all the truths that are stored up in our memories and that provide the basis for us to receive the Lord's mercy. In the Writings for the New Church these memories are often called “remains” or “remnants,” a literal reference to the remnants of the tribes of Israel when they were taken into captivity, but in the spiritual sense they are the truths (and states of good) that “remain” with us, deeply seated in the interiors of our minds, even in times of temptation.

The stirring of the waters by an angel in those times surely must have been an exciting and dramatic event. But what is the parallel in our spiritual lives? The meaning of the word, angel, is messenger, and so in the spiritual sense it represents the message itself. But what message stirs up the memories of truth that we have stored away in the interiors of our minds?

The most obvious answer is some new thought or insight from the Word. But it might also be something somebody says to us that makes us think. Or it might be something we read in a novel, or hear on the radio, or see on TV. The Lord works in mysterious ways and like the

people waiting by the Pool of Bethesda we need to be alert at all times for any message that will stir the memories of goodness and truth, so that the Lord's mercy can affect us.

But even so, as the story illustrates, this may not be sufficient. In the children's talk we reviewed what the man in the story told the Lord about his predicament. Now it's important to see that this was not just an excuse but a real reason for his inability to get over his problem: he had "no man to put (him) into the pool when the water (was) stirred up." Again, a "man" represents our understanding. Sometimes when we have disabling problems, one reason we can't get the help we know we need – the help we can actually see right in front of us – is that we do not have the necessary understanding to take advantage of that help. This was solved in the story by the Lord Himself not only telling the fellow what to do, but also giving him the ability to do it. But can we be so presumptuous as to think the Lord will do the same for us?

Well, why not? In fact, the truth is that He does so right here in the spiritual meaning of this story; we just have to take it in.

"Jesus said to him, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk'" (John 5:8).

We can only imagine the astonishment that must have washed over that man in Jerusalem – maybe not only because he could walk; for all we know he could walk anyway, he just had an infirmity that kept him from getting to the water quickly. But it is clear from the story that when the Lord spoke to him he knew immediately that he was healed – even though he didn't know who had healed him.

Now this is important. He didn't know who had healed him, but he got the message and he did as he was told.

To rise up, spiritually, is to raise our thoughts to a higher level, to see into the realm of causes rather than just effects, to focus on the goods and truths of spiritual life and not just natural life with all its apparent urgency, pleasure and pain. What is really important here, anyway? If you had perfect physical health and all the material stuff you needed but carried a load of anger, jealousy, resentment, guilt or fear where-ever you went, wouldn't this really limit you and make you miserable? On the other hand, if you can be "content with the dispensations of Providence" knowing that the Lord is in charge and is preparing you in everything for heaven, does it really matter how much stuff you have?

But suppose you've been badly treated, or suffered from your own unhealthy habits for years and all your experience tells you that you're just stuck? You've tried, but you just can't seem to get over whatever it is that's holding you back. You can see that you need help; you can even see that help is available, but you just can't seem to get to it before the moment passes. Then what?

Well, it may be that your focus is actually too much on the problem. If you can imagine the solution instead of the problem, or the goal instead of the obstacles, if you can see past what's directly in front of you and picture a good outcome you may be in a much better psychological position to get better. But even more than this, if you can raise your thoughts to the sphere of heaven and remember the Lord and His love in everything He will give you the power to move to a better state.

The next step is to “take up your bed.” The Writings tell us that a bed, which is where we rest or sleep, represents the doctrine, that is to say, the fundamental framework of our thought, our set of assumptions and our approach to life. It consists of the underlying principles upon which all our thinking rests, and with which we are comfortable and relaxed.

But the point is that when we are in trouble it is not sufficient to just rest unthinkingly on these principles; we must “take them up,” reflect on them and carry them actively in our minds as we prepare to act. We need to put the principles to work in our reflection – not on the problem so much as the solution, or how to get to a better state. If, for example, we believe in the Lord it will be important to reflect on what it is He really wants for us and how He operates and how we can co-operate with Him no matter what anyone or anything else may do to us. And we will carry these thoughts into action in response to the Lord’s final command, which was to “walk.”

To “walk” of course in the spiritual sense is to live, and not just to live outwardly, mechanically, but inwardly, wholeheartedly. Normally we speak of walking on a path or “way,” which refers to the truths that lead us from here to there. So the command to “walk” is a command to live according to what we know and believe, in effect, for us, to live in charity toward the neighbor without thought of reward, to let go even of legitimate grievances that can’t be helped knowing that evil brings its own reward without our help, and to stand on principle no matter what the consequences because we know the Lord will look after us. It is to read the Word and really study what it means, to make decisions based on the truth rather than the appearance, and to shun evils on every level as sins against the Lord.

You can add your own specific categories of life according to the doctrine drawn from the Word, but the point is to do the right thing for the right reasons even though it may seem fraught with problems, knowing that if we trust the Lord He will bless our efforts.

It is interesting, at the very least, that this incident we have been reviewing is the third miracle recorded in the Gospel of John, and all three of these miracles involve water. The first was in Cana, of Galilee, where the Lord turned water into wine. The second was in Sychar, of Samaria where the Lord told a complete stranger at a certain water well all about herself, and then taught her about the living water of spiritual life. Now we are in Jerusalem, the capital, at the Pool of Bethesda, where people could be healed of their illnesses when an angel stirred up its water. Again, water corresponds to truth, and the natural progression from Galilee in the north through Samaria to Jerusalem represents the spiritual progression from a generally receptive but obscure, uncertain state through a process of thoughtful reflection, to a state of faith and conviction. So it is here, finally, that the Lord actually heals a man for the first time.

And so it is that we can be healed of our spiritual weaknesses or infirmities when the Lord finds us in a state of real determination and informed effort. It doesn’t matter how long we have labored with a particular spiritual infirmity – except that in the story the reference to 38 years seems to represent a full state of “remains” (the 30) looking to a new beginning (the 8). Contrary to the appearance the man at the pool of Bethesda had not given up. He was in a state of innocence; he had come to be healed, and despite his limitations he was immediately receptive of the Lord’s command. But at least part of the point of the story is that he had labored with his disability for a long time until he came to the Pool and there encountered the Lord.

In the same way we can labor for a long time in ignorance of what we really need. We can try and try and try to overcome some evil in our lives only to be frustrated every time – until we hear the Lord speaking to us in His mercy and truth in such a way that we can see beyond our limitations and finally understand very directly what we need to do. But we have to persist, even when it starts to look futile and hopeless.

Again, this miracle in the literal sense is about a natural healing. It is among the many miracles the Lord did in order to establish His credibility and power among the people, and to overcome the power of the hells. But for us, now, it is not about natural healing; the Lord has given us incredible new freedom and responsibility to deal with these things through science and medicine. For us, now, this story is about spiritual healing: – raising our minds to a higher level of consciousness through the spiritual meaning of the Word, taking up the doctrine of love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor so that it really affects our thinking, and putting it to work in the day-to-day decisions that will immediately free us from the limitations of selfish and worldly concerns. This is what the Lord wants for us most of all, that we may not only be prepared for life in heaven but begin to enjoy that life right here and now.

So the story ends with a debate about the Sabbath, since it was the Sabbath when the man was healed. And here's the point: – the word, Sabbath, means rest, and we are at rest or at ease spiritually when we are free of our selfish and worldly concerns, focused on the greater good, the Lord and the neighbor. This is why Jesus finally said to the man, "See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you." Our sin in this case, when we have been raised up out of our material pre-occupations, would be to revert back and perhaps indulge in these pre-occupations even more recklessly than before, rejecting the Lord, His teachings and His power for our own stupid pleasures. But we have to know that in the end this is not restful; it is not really fulfilling; ultimately it just makes us tired and cynical.

Let us resolve, therefore, never to give up, but instead, like the man who had labored for 38 years with his infirmity, wait patiently for the Lord, and be prepared every day for His healing messages of mercy and truth.

Amen.

Lessons:     John 5:1-18  
                  Children's talk on the miracle at the Pool of Bethesda

Apocalypse Explained #163:7  
                  Psalm 51