

## "Do You Want to be Made Well?"

Rev. Peter Bynum

May 25, 2025

<sup>1</sup>After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. <sup>3</sup>In these lay many invalids -- blind, lame, and paralyzed. <sup>4</sup><sup>5</sup>One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup>When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?"

<sup>7</sup>The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me."

<sup>8</sup>Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." <sup>9</sup>At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. (John 5:1-9)

The Pool of Beth-zatha, or Bethesda, was the place to go when there was no other place to go. It was close to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem... literally in the shadow of the Temple. But the people at the pool had found no help there with the priests and religious types.<sup>1</sup> They had found no help with the doctors of the day, the faith healers of the day, the motivational speakers of the day. So they went to the place where people go when there is no other place to go, the place of last resort, the last and only remaining hope to be healed and made whole.

One of those people, the man in this story, has a name, but we are not told what it is. All we know is that he has been ill for 38 years. We don't know how many of those years were spent trying to find a cure in the normal ways, but it is likely that many of those 38 years had been spent around this pool. Legend had it that, every so often, an angel would mystically stir the waters of the pool. When that happened, the first person to make it to the water would be healed. It was a race that could begin at any time, and there were no points for second place. It required constant vigilance, with near certain disappointment, especially if you were like this poor man, whose disability – whatever it was – limited his physical mobility to the point that the only way he could make it to the water was to be carried by someone else. And he had no one else. The odds were astronomically against him, but like I said, this was the place to go when there was nowhere else to go.

In setting the tragic scene of this man's plight, the gospel tells us what seem to me to be a very strange detail. When Jesus sees this poor man lying near the pool, he asks him, "**Do you want to be made well?**" It seems like an insult to even ask such a question, even cruel. Is he taunting this poor man? Of course he wants to be made well! Right? Can't we assume that?

That is a question that students and scholars have asked for centuries. It's a good rule of thumb actually. When the Bible throws in a detail that seems weird, confusing, or out of place, that is a flashing light meant to lead us to into the mystery, lead us to the questions we need to be asking ourselves. If we assume that Jesus was not trying to be cruel – which I would say is an assumption that we should make – then why would Jesus ask this man who has endured 38 years of pain and disappointment if he wants to be made well?

One thing we can say is that the question certainly got this man's attention, and that is hardly an insignificant thing in itself. If that man was there in that same place, every day, year after year, don't you think most people quit noticing him? Don't you think the sight of him became so familiar that he

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Homer Henderson, "Down by the Poolside," [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org), May 16, 2004.



just kind of faded into the background? Think about how we often act when someone comes up to us on the street to ask for money or help. Do we meet their gaze, or are we more likely to avoid eye contact, because we are on the way to somewhere else, or we've got our own problems to think about? Does it change your view to know that this is the only time, in all of scripture, when Jesus walks up and asks a question of someone without being approached and spoken to first?<sup>2</sup> Seen in that light, Jesus' question is a notable act of recognition, even respect, because it is evidence that Jesus actually notices this man -- really *sees* him -- and actually cares about his plight.

Another reason Jesus may have asked this question is because the answer was not as obvious as we might think. If you have lived with something for 38 years -- even if it is a problem -- that something becomes normal. However difficult it is to live with that issue, it becomes familiar, expected, and in some ways, possibly even comfortable. And if that man were to be suddenly healed, his life would radically change. There would be new expectations of him. He would need to be responsible for more than just looking at the pool and depending on the kindness of strangers. So it is possible, isn't it, that the prospect of that kind of radical change would be very daunting.

In the words of pastor and author Debie Thomas, this is the "uncomfortable truth" at the heart of this gospel story. The question "Do you want to be made well?" stings, she writes, *"because I know exactly what it's like to say I want out, to say I want freedom, to say I want healing — and not quite mean it. I know what it's like to cling to brokenness because it's familiar. I know what it's like to make victimhood my identity. I know what it's like to benefit from the very things that cause me harm. I know what it's like to sink into self-pity. I know what it's like to assume that everyone else has access to a magic pill I'll never get my hands on. I know what it's like to decide that I'm doomed to sit at the very edge of healing for the rest of my life, and never attain it."*<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps we know that feeling too, the sting of knowing that, even as we pray for a change, there is a part of us that is not quite ready for that change, or up for that change. As Tony Robbins has famously said, *"Change happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of making a change."* And that tipping point is sometimes difficult to find or to feel.

Both of these rationales give helpful insight into why Jesus may have posed this question to the man by the pool. But a third one seems to me the most likely explanation, and the most important one. One 19<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholar said it this way, that Jesus asked this question *"to rouse the sick man out of his lethargy and despondency... to [inspire him] with some expectation of being cured."*<sup>4</sup> In other words, Jesus was simply trying give a hopeless man a glimmer of hope.

In his wonderful book *Choosing Hope*, my friend David Arnow shares a story told by Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who later served as a dressmaker for Mary Todd Lincoln in the White House. Her journal, which was later published, includes recollections from a period in 1863 when the news from the battlefield was consistently bad. On this Memorial Day Weekend, as we remember those who have given the ultimate sacrifice in defense of others, this was a time when those kinds of losses were profoundly deep. "Fair fields had been stained with blood," she wrote, *"thousands of brave men had fallen, and thousands of eyes were weeping for the fallen at home."*

*"These were sad, anxious days to Mr. Lincoln,"* Keckley continued,

*"and those who saw the man in privacy only could tell how much he suffered. One day he came into the room where I was fitting a dress on Mrs. Lincoln. His step was slow and heavy, and his face sad. Like a tired child he threw himself upon a sofa, and shaded his eyes with his hands. He was a complete picture of dejection. Mrs. Lincoln, observing his troubled look, asked: 'Where have you been, father?'"*

---

<sup>2</sup> Cambridge Bible Commentary, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/5-6.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2225-the-question-that-hurts>

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge Bible: <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/5-6.htm>

*"To the War Department," was the brief, almost sullen answer.*

*"Any news?"*

*"Yes, plenty of news, but no good news. It is dark, dark everywhere." He reached forth one of his long arms, and took a small Bible from a stand near the head of the sofa, opened the pages of the holy book, and soon was absorbed in reading them.*

*A quarter of an hour passed, and on glancing at the sofa the face of the President seemed more cheerful. The dejected look was gone, and the countenance was lighted up with new resolution and hope. The change was so marked that I could not but wonder at it, and wonder led to the desire to know what book of the Bible afforded so much comfort to the reader. Making the search for a missing article an excuse, I walked gently around the sofa, and looking into the open book, I discovered that Mr. Lincoln was reading that divine comforter, Job. He read with Christian eagerness, and the courage and hope that he derived from the inspired pages made him a new man. I almost imagined that I could hear the Lord speaking to him from out the whirlwind of battle: "Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me."*

*What a sublime picture was this! A ruler of a mighty nation going to the pages of the Bible with simple Christian earnestness for comfort and courage, and finding both in the darkest hours of a nation's calamity."<sup>5</sup>*

Two years later, at the fallen president's funeral, the words that had restored his flagging hope in the dark night of his soul were offered to a grieving nation that was also searching for light in the darkness: despite it all, *"I know that my Vindicator lives."*<sup>6</sup>

After 38 years of disappointment... 38 years of seeking an elusive cure that only seemed to get farther and farther away with each passing day... the weight was so heavy that the man does not, or cannot, answer Jesus' simple question, His response speaks not of hope; only of futility: *"Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else [always] steps down ahead of me."*

And, even though the water never stirred for him, something in that moment and Christ's presence did stir within him. When Jesus said, *"Stand up, take your mat and walk,"* hope that had been lost was found again, and he was able to take action. After all those hopeless years, he was able to pick up his mat and begin to walk.

This same question is posed to us, even now. It is a question that can sting, especially if we are willing to confront our own complacency... our own resignation to things that we know we should change but have not changed ... perhaps even our hopelessness that the change we seek may ever come. But the good news is that Jesus is willing to seek us out and come to us even in the places where we go when there is nowhere else to go, the places where hope is all but lost. In that question, we are seen by God... we are challenged by God... and we are given new hope in God.

So, what do you think?

*Do you want to be made well?*

---

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Keckley, "Behind the Scenes" <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/24968/24968-h/24968-h.htm>

<sup>6</sup> David Arnow, *Choosing Hope* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2022) pp. 126-7.