

“Rise, Take up Your Bed, and Walk”

by the Rev. Grant H. Odhner

“Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:6).

The Lord asks this question of us, just as He did of people 2000 years ago. And unless we can answer “yes,” we cannot hope to know the deeper, richer life that the Lord promises. He said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick” (Matthew 9:12). We cannot accept a greater sense of the Lord’s life unless we recognize the attitudes and priorities in ourselves that stand in the way of true spiritual life. These are our sickness.

Our own sickness must be a reality for us, both if we are to be made well and if we are to understand this story. The Word’s stories hold secrets—truths that remain secret to those who look with worldly eyes or with faithless eyes, or who look with self-sufficiency. If we are not in need, we cannot see. This is the nature of parables! And this is the nature of the entire Word. “Without a parable He did not speak to them” (Matthew 13:35).

With this in mind, let us look at the parable before us.

It begins, “After this there was a feast of the Jews and Jesus went up to Jerusalem” (John 5:1). There were three feasts which the Law required the Jews to celebrate at the temple in Jerusalem. These feasts remembered 1) the Lord’s deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egypt (Feast of Passover); 2) His “planting” them in the land of Canaan and beginning to make them fruitful (Feast of Weeks or First Fruits); and 3) His bringing them to full blessing there (Feast of Tabernacles or Ingathering). Viewed spiritually, these feasts were held to recognize the Lord’s role in 1) liberating our minds; 2) in planting seeds of truth in them; and finally 3) His role in blessing our minds with the full fruits of His life (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9296). Jesus went up to Jerusalem to these feasts because He is the one who liberates, grows, and blesses our minds. This is the general subject in this story and that’s why the setting is one of these feasts.

“Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda having five porches” (John 5:2). The Sheep Gate was just north of the temple, on the northeast wall of the city. Perhaps it was through this gate that sheep were brought in on their way to the temple for sacrifices, or perhaps they were bought and sold there for use in sacrifices. A gate is an entryway, marking an approach. In a symbolic sense, the Sheep Gate pictures the opening of the mind toward spiritual life, and a desire to follow the Shepherd in this path.

But the main focus here is not the gate but the pool near it, called “Bethesda.” It was trapezoid-shaped, divided into two pools by a walkway across the middle. Stairs in each corner led down into the pool. It was said to have “five porches” (John 5:2). This refers to colonnades, one on each side and a fifth one over the walkway.

What is this “pool” that stands at the entryway to our spiritual life? It is symbolic of the reservoir of ideas in our memories, ideas of what is true that we have gathered from our experience, and especially from the Word. In themselves, as they exist in our memories, these ideas have little life. They are only by the entryway to the real us. It is a surface part of us that gathers

knowledge. Our first perspective on the things that we learn is a sensory one; we are at first tied to the way things feel and appear. It is a higher part of us that lifts knowledge out of the memory where it is first lodged; and turns it over and sees it more deeply. Still, the pool of truths in our memory is called “Bethesda”—the “House of Mercy”—because of the potential that it holds for opening our minds and leading us to the Lord. The Lord mercifully gives us ideas that can lead us, and He is constantly present, “hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2), waiting for the right time to send His angels to stir those ideas to life.

Now in the five porches around the pool there “lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed” (John 5:3). What does this say about our entryway to spiritual life? Our outer mind is clogged with impediments to communication with the Lord. We are “sick” with selfishness and its petty concerns; we are “blinded” with ignorance, prejudice, and our world-centered outlook; we are “lame” in our inability to progress; we are “paralyzed” in our powerlessness and lack of energy for achieving something beyond ourselves.

All these sick people in the story were “waiting for the moving of the water... For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had” (John 5:3-4). This describes how the impediments to our spiritual life and progress are healed. When we are willing and ready to commit our lives to them, the true ideas in our memory are stirred by the Lord’s messengers—by His spirit. Then they come alive for us. They become insight and inspiration where before they had been just knowledge. We recognize their truth. Our sickness is then seen from a new perspective; we gain a separation from it; we move beyond it (see *Arcana Coelestia* 10083).

This healing does not happen completely all at once. It happens gradually, one sickness at a time (so to speak). Some of our sicknesses take a long time to heal. We may think we are ready and “waiting” for them to change, but the Lord knows what our real readiness to see and accept and change is. Often, we spend a long time wanting change from one part of us but not another. We want change from our understanding, but not yet from our will. In other words, intellectually we see that we are sick in some respect and that change is desirable, but we are not yet emotionally ready for change. For example, part of us may grieve over the consequences of a bad habit; we may see its tragic effects on our life, its perversity! At the same time, we cannot find the resolve to really accept a change in attitude and life-style. The fact is, consciously or unconsciously, we still feel attachment to the delights that are the source of our dysfunction. And every spiritual sickness has its source in some delight that sustains it.

Only the one who stepped into the pool first was healed. The quickest and readiest person found relief. “Quickness” in spiritual terms is a product of our will. We feel quick and alive when our heart is involved. When we are acting mostly from our understanding, we are slow—more effort, more self-compulsion is required. As a result, our responsiveness is somewhat dull and forced.

How painful and frustrating it is to see that we are sick and incapacitated, and yet not to find the quickness and resolve of will to change! Did we hurt someone for the thousandth time? Were we impatient again? Did we give in to some bitterness, even after all of our intellectual resolves? Did we “fall” to the same old lust?

In the story, we see the plight of a man who had had an infirmity for thirty-eight years (John 5:5). He was unable to get himself into the water quickly enough. As he said, “I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me” (John 5:7). Thirty-eight years is a long time. We can imagine the pitch of despair. Viewed symbolically, periods of time mark states of mind. An interval of time seems long or short to us, depending on our mental attitude. And just as slowness and quickness are a matter of how much our will is involved, so here the length of the time reinforces the fact that the will is resisting the healing even though the understanding wants it.

In addition, like all numbers in the Word, “thirty-eight” has a specific symbolic meaning. This was the number of years it took for all the Israelites who had doubted the Lord’s power to die in the wilderness. Their deaths were necessary before the others could begin to enter the promised land (Deuteronomy 2:14). Thirty-eight (literally “thirty and eight”) refers to a mental phase coming to fullness so that a new one can begin. “Thirty” means fullness of preparation and readiness. Joseph was thirty when he began to rule Egypt (see Genesis 41:46); David was thirty when he became king (see II Samuel 5:4); Jesus was thirty when He began His ministry (see Luke 3:23). “Eight” means a new beginning. The eighth day is the first day after a complete week, the beginning of a new week. It was the day of an infant boy’s life when he was circumcised and entered the covenant. It is often mentioned in the Law as a special day in purification ceremonies and festivals.

Thirty-eight is mentioned in our story because spiritual change does not happen without preparation and readiness. For a given change in mental outlook to become permanent, certain crucial experiences are necessary, certain knowledges must be acquired, certain realizations must come—realizations born of aging, of encountering difficulties and frustrations, of failing, of experiencing various kinds of success and satisfaction. We must learn the value of things through experiencing highs and lows, presence and absence, good and evil. When we have acquired enough of these things and are ready to begin a new phase, we have achieved “thirty and eight.”

The Lord is constantly preparing us to be healed, constantly trying to make life better for us. But it is not until we are ready for Him that we see Him standing above us in our infirm condition, and hear His invitation: “Do you to be made well?”

We may not be aware at first that the invitation is coming from the Lord. The man in our story wasn’t. Still, our response must be one of self-awareness. In other words, we must know our own powerlessness to save ourselves. (“I have no man...while I am coming, another steps down before me.”) It is this realization of our own powerlessness, especially, that is meant by “thirty.” Joseph and David both were given power at age thirty. Both represented the Lord, who proclaimed Himself the Messiah, the king, at the same age. “Thirty” means recognizing our own lack of power and giving all power to the Lord, letting Him rule. This recognition is what enables us to hear the Lord’s voice saying to us, “Rise, take up your bed and walk” (John 5:8).

“Rise, take up your bed and walk.” People who lie in a bed are either asleep, weak, or sick. Those who rise and walk are awake and well. The Lord causes us to become spiritually awake—

energetic and well—when we are ready. His “speaking” these words represent the inflow of His love and truth, which stir us to new possibilities, new resolves, new power.

The Lord’s words also symbolically describe the healing. “Rise” signals a raising of the mind to what lies above the self. We must look to the Lord, to a higher power, to goals in life that are larger than we are. And when the mind’s focus is raised, then the “bed” in which it has been resting is also raised. Our mental bed is the set of ideas that underlie our basic thinking and willing. These ideas are “taken up” when we rethink them or see them in a new way, out of a desire to respond to the Lord’s will. Finally the Lord said, “Walk.” To “walk” is to progress. Literally it is to actually change our location and direction. Spiritually, it is to change our state of mind, our way of responding to life’s events, to people around us, to insults, to frustrations, to our old negative mental dialogue.

And in what direction does the freed mind “walk”? Jesus later found the man who had accepted His healing in the temple (see John 5:14). The temple, the Lord’s house, pictures His fuller presence, which is heaven. This is the goal of all healing: to dwell more closely in the Lord’s life and to have that life more fully in us. It was in the temple that the healed man found out who his Savior was. So with us, it is when we come into a greater sense of the Lord’s life that we can really know that He healed us. We feel gratitude and humility before Him. We have a clear sense of His mercy. We know that He has done it.

This realization is what is meant by the “Sabbath” (John 5:9). All the miracles of healing in our life are done on the “Sabbath”. That is, they are done with the acknowledgment that the Lord alone creates and creates anew. It does appear that we are laboring from ourselves—just as it appeared to the Jews that the healed man was laboring by carrying his bed. Indeed, we must work as if everything depended on us. Yet we can truly say, as the man in the story did, “He who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your bed and walk’” (John 5:11). We labor by the Lord’s authority, recognizing that He is doing the work within us.

“Do you want to be made well?” What greater testimony to the Lord’s love is there than this: that He allows us the freedom to make His salvation our own? He accomplishes it, but not without our full involvement! The Lord does not tell us that we must be made well. In His infinite wisdom and mercy He asks, “Do you want to be made well?” He asks so that the choice may be ours. It is left to us to respond to His invitation: “Rise; take up your bed and walk.”

Amen.

Lessons: Isaiah 55; John 5:1-15; *Arcana Coelestia* 2694:1-3