

A NEW GAIT BY THE SHEEP'S GATE

JOHN 5:1-15

Gary Clark had finally reached the last leg of his triathlon. He had already finished a 1.5 kilometer swim and a 40 kilometer bicycle race. Now a 10 kilometer run lay ahead of him. Gary had never competed in a triathlon before, and so he considered this the ultimate test for his endurance. His goal was not to win, his goal was to finish the course.

For weeks his family and friends had tried to discourage Gary from competing in the triathlon. Maybe years ago, they said. But at the age of 47? It was certainly not wise. But there was Gary Clark, out there in the blazing sun of Tucson, Arizona, racing in the 5th annual Tucson Triathlon.

Gary had seen a triathlon on T.V. When he went to his doctor asking him of the possibilities of entering one, his doctor was very hesitant. Gary would have to take a stress test, he would have to endure very careful and rigorous training. But Gary had done everything needed, and now here he was in the 3rd and final leg. Gary did finish that triathlon competition. He did not win, but he finished ahead of 500 other participants. And since that first triathlon in Tucson, Gary Clark has completed triathlons in Denver and Boston. He has done so despite his age, and despite what many would consider a debilitating physical condition. For Gary Clark will always have the distinction of being the first athlete to ever compete in a triathlon, let alone finish the competition, with a transplanted heart.

It is an encouragement for each of us to see one overcome such severe physical obstacles to return to an active, energetic life. Perhaps that is one of the reasons

for the miracles of healing which Jesus performed being such an inspiration to us. So many times, Christ took one who was in a hopeless physical condition, without any future at all here upon this earth, and He restored that person to perfect health so that he or she might live an energetic and productive life.

Such is the case with the third miracle that John records in his gospel. In the first verses of the 5th chapter of John's gospel, we are introduced to a man who was in desperate straights. He had been an invalid for some 38 years. For decades he had been living in the company of others who were blind, lame, and paralyzed so his constant environment had been one of discouragement and depression. But unlike many of his other colleagues there by the pool of Bethesda, he didn't have any friends or companions to stand by him and help him. He was not only greatly infirmed, but he was also very much alone in this world. So then, we find in this Biblical scene a very unfortunate man. Listen as I read the Biblical account of this miracle:

JN 5:1 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. ² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie--the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

JN 5:7 "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me."

JN 5:8 Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat."

JN 5:11 But he replied, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' "

JN 5:12 So they asked him, "Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?"

JN 5:13 The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

JN 5:14 Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you." ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

The pool of Bethesda was just inside the Sheep's Gate and just below the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The sacrificial animals would be brought in thru the gate of the wall, and then cleansed in the pool, before being taken up to the temple for their sacrificial duties. Perhaps it was thought that these sacrificial animals brought healing powers to these waters. There was also a Jewish legend that periodically an angel of God came and stirred up the waters giving to them healing powers. In any case, there were many infirmed people including this man surrounding this specific pool. We have no idea as to how often it was believed that the angel would come, every year or every decade or every 100 years. But whatever the cultural situation, we know that this man had been there for some 38 years, longing to be able to go up to the temple with the other worshippers, wishing with all of his heart to have the privilege that we all have exercised this morning being able to be mobile, being able to come together to worship the Lord, but this

individual had just been able to look with longing eyes as worshipper after worshipper had passed him by with his animal offering for almost 4 decades. And so he pictures for us a most hopeless and pitiful case. A lonely, infirmed man, without hope in this world. But Jesus Christ, the son of God, singled out this man to be the recipient of his grace, and in doing to he would change this man for the rest of his life.

G. Campbell Morgan, the great English preacher, once said, "All the parables of Jesus are miracles of wisdom, and all the miracles of Jesus are parables of teaching." This might be a generalization, but certainly it is true with regards to the miracles of John. As we have already seen, John carefully selected 7 major miracles, the perfect number of completion, and he specifically told us that he could have given more but these miracles were recorded that thru them we might believe that Jesus is truly the Son of God.

It is very clear, then, that John selects these miracles not only for their human interest and fascination, but also as parables of teaching to lead us to the truth that Jesus Christ is the son of God.

We have seen that in the first 2 miracles we have studied. In the first miracle we saw Jesus take a very embarrassing situation for a friendly family, and turn that situation thru a miracle into a parable of teaching for his mother and disciples. Jesus not only met the physical needs of the family turning the water into wine, but he also initiated his public ministry gently altering his relationship with his mother and giving the disciples a sign of his true nature so that the miracle ends with the words, "his disciples put their faith in him."

Then last week we looked at Christ's second miracle, a parable of teaching to that official in the royal court. And we saw the flame of faith grow in this man as Jesus worked with him thru this miracle so that the miracle concluded with the words, "So he and all his household believed."

We would then expect in keeping with John's theme to see a similar pattern in this miracle, John choosing this specific healing out of the thousands that Jesus performed to use it as a parable of teaching for us, to teach us some spiritual truths thru this physical healing. And we are not disappointed. For Jesus makes 3 statements in this miracle, and each of these statements led this infirmed man thru 3 steps in his healing. These 3 steps in his physical healing can be seen as 3 steps necessary in our more important spiritual healing as well. Let's look at these 3 steps.

1. Notice step #1 found in the first words of Christ to this man in verse 6.

READ 5:6

⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

Now our first observation is to think "what an obvious question". I mean, it appears to be so obvious that we wonder why Jesus even asked it. Of course, this man wants to get well. Why else would he be there? Why else would he have practically lived by this pool for the past 38 years hoping against hope that somehow he might be able to get into its waters which he believed had healing power? Doesn't his very presence at the well indicate his desire to get well?

But then the more we think of this situation, and Christ's sensitivity to people's thoughts and needs, the more we realize that Jesus was asking a very logical question. After all, this man had been in this very situation for some 38 years. Perhaps during those first months, or even years, his spirits had been high and he had real hope of healing. But then as time drew out, his hopes might have also faded. We don't know if an angel ever appeared at this pool, or if anyone really was ever healed. Perhaps he had become disillusioned with the legend that had been taught to him. Perhaps his living at this pool at just become a way of life for him, and perhaps he had become secure in it. Undoubtedly, the thought that he might be healed today was not foremost in his mind- not after 38 years of waiting.

And the answer that he gives to Jesus indicates the propriety of Christ's question to him. He does not answer, "Of course, I want to be healed. I wait daily with the expectation that this might be the day of my healing." No, he rather passes the responsibility and blame for his predicament onto the shoulders of others. "I don't have anybody to help me get into the water when I need to. If I had help, I might not be in this predicament."

Now what he said was certainly true, but this is not the answer to the question Jesus had just asked him. So Jesus is going to move the responsibility from the shoulders of others to this man himself, and he is going to give this man the opportunity to make a decision of faith that would affect the rest of his life. So then, the question of whether or not he really wanted to be healed would be very foundational. Because if he had become so accustomed to his plight in life and secure in it that he really wanted to remain there by the pool, then he would choose

that life style over the one which Jesus was going to offer him. On the other hand, if he really wanted to be healed, Jesus was going to give to him that opportunity. In either case, it would be now his choice, and his responsibility for his life direction.

In a parallel manner, God comes to each of his creatures in the spiritual realm asking them the question, "Do you want to be healed spiritually? Do you want to be forgiven and cleansed from your sin? Do you want to be declared to be righteous in my sight?" We are likewise tempted to think that such a question is too obvious. But as we reflect upon it we realize that it is not only an essential question, but it is also a foundational one.

There was a very interesting survey taken recently by the Automobile Association of America. A.A.A presented a situation to an equal sampling of men and women. This was the situation. You are on vacation, and have carefully mapped out your trip. But as you are journeying along the way, you suddenly see a sign that reads "Road Construction next 30 miles." The sign detours you onto some unknown country road, and then other signs turn you onto several other unmapped roads." After driving for several miles, you realize that you are not seeing any more detour signs. You suspect that you have taken some kind of wrong turn. And time confirms this suspicion for soon you realize that you are lost. But then you see a gas station by the side of the road ahead. Now here was the question of the survey. Would you: 1. Stop at that gas station and ask directions or 2. Keep on driving trying to find the right road even though you know that you are lost. I can see by the smiles on your faces that many of you like

myself have been in this kind of predicament. Do you know how the survey turned out? Just about 9 out of 10 of the men replied that they would not stop at the gas station, but would drive on trying to find the road on their own. Almost 8 out of 10 of the women replied that they would not stop at the gas station , but would drive on trying to find the road on their own.

Now I am sure that this survey could evoke some interesting speculations on the differences between men and women, but we're not going to go there this morning. But the point of the survey is this- the vast majority of both men and women chose to be lost rather than to seek out help.

And what is so often true in the physical realm is equally true in the spiritual realm. For it is clear from the teachings of the Bible that the majority of the people in the U.S. today who have heard the gospel message of spiritual salvation, have chosen to remain lost rather than being saved spiritually.

So the question "Do you want to get well?" is a very pertinent one. This statement of Christ represents the first step in healing. "Do you want to get well?"

2. But notice now the second step with me. It is brought out in the second statement of Christ. READ 5:8

JN 5:8 Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."

There are 3 specifics that are involved in His command. The first part of the command is "to get up." Isn't it interesting that Christ commands the man to do the specific action that he could not do? Jesus did not tell him to repeat some sentences after him- the man certainly could have done that. He did not encourage him to wait 2 more years there by the pool. That God would reward his patience at

the end of the 40th year- again the man could have done that. No, Jesus commanded the man to do the very thing that he could not do- he was an invalid, he could not do it himself. But as he was willing to try, the Lord Jesus Christ would give to him the strength to get up.

The second part of the command was to "pick up your mat". Now this specific command was going to get this man in a little bit of trouble with the religious leaders later on in our passage, for they considered carrying one's bed or bedroll or sleeping bag in today's terminology to be doing work on the Sabbath. In fact, according to the Jewish traditions, it was work to pick up the bed, let alone carry it around. So then, realizing that this man probably would receive criticism for his action, why did Jesus command him to pick up his mat?

I like what Dr. Marcus Dods wrote concerning this command for in just a brief sentence, I think he puts his finger on the crux of the command. "Why was the man to take up his bed? In order that there should be no provision made for a relapse."

He's probably right. Jesus Christ was starting this man out on a new way of life. He would no longer need that bed by the pool of Bethesda. So Christ was encouraging him to burn this bridge behind him.

And then Jesus says, "walk". Before his complaint had been that there was no one to carry him to the pool. Now Jesus says "walk on your own." He would no longer need to rely upon other men, but rather he would be free to move about on his own.

The pattern of Christ's commands here was very similar to his calling of the

disciples by the sea of Galilee. Jesus came up to those fisherman, Peter, James and John, as they were working at their trade, and he said to them. "Leave your nets, follow me and I will make you to be fishers of men." They were commanded to do the one thing that they would have never been able to do themselves. They had been trained to be fishermen, not religious leaders. They would never have been accepted in such a position. But as they heeded Christ's command, He would enable them to fulfill his command. But he wanted for them to leave their nets behind, their former way of life, and to walk with him.

So Jesus Christ comes to each of us saying "get up, pick up your mat, and walk." Be willing to leave your former way of life embracing the world's standards, and commit your life to me. Becoming alive spiritually is the one thing that we are totally unable to do in our own strength. But Christ says, as we are willing to follow this command, He will give to us the grace and strength needed to "get up" spiritually. And many of us have experienced this to be true, as the H.S. of God has come into our lives and have made us alive spiritually as we have trusted in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. It is Christ's desire that we leave our former way of life behind and that we commit ourselves to walk after him, to follow him as a disciple follows his teacher.

3. But now quickly we must move to the 3rd step. We find this in Christ's statement found in verse 14. READ 5:14

JN 5:14 Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."

Jesus now moves from the physical to the spiritual realm in this man's life.

Yes, he had been completely cured physically, but there was something that was far more important to him. That was his spiritual life. And Christ encourages him to apply these physical lessons to his spiritual life as well. Unhappily, from all appearances, this man allowed himself to be too influenced by the pressure of the Jewish religious leaders to follow Christ. He shows his continuing pattern to pass the buck of responsibility in verse 11 when the leaders asked him why he was carrying his mat on the Sabbath. "The man who made me well told me to do it." was his reply. And then after Jesus revealed himself to him a second time, he immediately goes to the leaders creating a stir between those leaders and Jesus concerning healing on the Sabbath day. How different was his response from that of the man who was blind from birth whom Jesus will heal in the 6th miracle found in chapter 9. This reminds us that while these miracles were performed by Jesus so that people would believe in him as the Messiah, amazingly not everyone did so. Many made the choice to reject him spiritually following the leadership of the Jewish leaders of the day.

But this response of the healed invalid does not alter the spiritual message of this miracle, and that is why John includes it here.

1. Jesus first of all asked him if he wanted to be healed. So it is that we need to come to the place of desiring spiritual help if we are to ever obtain it. We must confess the fact that we are sinners against God and we are hopeless without his help.

2. Then Jesus commanded him to "get up, pick up your mat and walk." So

Christ commands us to follow him, to leave our loyalties and affections towards our sin behind, and be willing to commit our lives to him. We are no more able to do this spiritually than this invalid was able to do it physically, but as we are willing to heed the command of Christ, he gives to us the grace and strength needed to follow that command.

3. And then Christ reminds us- you are well again, you are completely whole. As we trust in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, we are made complete spiritually in the eyes of God. It is now His desire that we walk in obedience to His commands. We can never go back and live the same lifestyle in bondage to our sin if we have really been made whole.

In Luke 19:10, Jesus gave the major purpose of his coming in one brief sentence. He said, "For the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost." He came to heal those who were spiritual invalids.