

"SICKNESS BY THE POOL"

A number of years ago I was in the city of Jerusalem and stood in the ~~place~~ ^{Spot} where this scene is supposed to

TEXT: "A man was there who had been sick for thirty-eight years. Jesus saw him lying there, and he knew that the man had been sick for such a long time; so he said to him, 'Do you want to get well?' The sick man answered, 'Sir, I don't have anyone here to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am trying to get in, somebody else gets there first'"

INTRODUCTION Fifteen years ago this month I stood in the city of Jerusalem where this scene is supposed to have taken place. But it's all different now, with the pool in a courtyard. In the time of Jesus, it was an open public place near the Sheep Gate. From time to time, the water bubbled up, and this was thought to be caused by some divine action. And the people believed that if a sick person could bathe in the pool immediately after this turbulence of the water, he would be healed. So the sick gathered around the pool in great numbers and five porches were built for their convenience. There was a man there who had been sick for thirty-eight years, and he had never been able to get healed, but he still waited.

One day Jesus of Nazareth came along and said to this man, "Do you want to get well?" The sick man answered that he had no one to help him and that someone always got into the pool ahead of him. Then Jesus said to him, "Get up, pick up your mat and walk". And the man immediately was healed!

There is a similarity between that situation and ours. We too are sick and we look for some special healing or some special power to make us whole again. How desperately we need one to come along and restore us to health and sanity. Suppose we look at this incident from John's Gospel and consider it in the light of our modern needs.

THEIR BELIEF IN MAGIC One of the first things we notice is their belief in magic. They thought that a troubling of the water would cure them. Now you may say that we have gone far beyond such superstition, and to be sure we have. But don't be too sure that we have shaken off all elements of magical expectation in finding answers to some of our problems. For instance -

~~Medicine is certainly one field where science has made fantastic contributions and our medical knowledge helps us perform miracles of healing.~~ But some times in our attitudes toward medicine, there is a vast amount of searching for answers and expecting healings that are far from scientific. We have been promised drugs which will cure worry and restore confidence with no bad effects. When the tranquilizers were first announced, it looked as if the psychiatrist and the professional counsellor would soon be out of business. A man could take a pill and suddenly feel at peace with himself and the world. Why would he need the help of a psychologist or a minister? But we have discovered it is not easy and not so simple. The drugs only touch the surface and give us temporary relief. They do not actually resolve the inner conflict which caused the trouble in the first place. How many there are who look for some prescription which will work miracles and serve as a cure for worry and tension.

Or consider for a moment this problem of losing weight. So many Americans are anxious to find a way to reduce because we're too rich - we eat too much, and we get fat. Some time ago a man wrote a book about calories not counting, the theory being that you could eat whatever you pleased and still lose weight. I remember seeing a reference somewhere to an indictment issued against the publishers

of that book for having promised things that could not be fulfilled. A few years ago somebody wrote a book about praying our weight away. That would be a good trick if we could do it. How eagerly we reach out for an answer to the problem of overweight that involves little or no discipline.

According to the movies, the television and the ads in the magazines, the answer seems to rest with alcohol. I don't know how it is with you, but so often I get upset of hearing people who are caught up in some strain or difficulty saying, "I need a drink". With some it seems to be the solution to every problem in life, until as Billy Graham one time predicted, when these people come to die, they will probably call for the bartender!

It seems to me that what so many are after today is happiness without character. We seek contentment without be willing to pay a price for it. And this tends to put us into the realm of magical expectation.

A man consulted a psychiatrist about the best thing to do for his children. He expected to receive advice about their training, their schooling, and the cultural advantages he ought to give them. But the psychiatrist, who was a very wise man, said simply, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother". Something we sometimes forget. The child who lives in a home where love is real is blessed far beyond the child whose father can write him a handsome check or give him all that money can buy. The healing that so many people stand in need of today is something money cannot buy, that something is bound up with love, with caring, with acceptance.

THE FAULT OF OTHERS

A second thing for us to notice is that this man by the pool thought the trouble was the fault of other people. He couldn't get into the pool. They didn't help him. They got in before him and had been doing so apparently for many, many years. Self pity? Perhaps it was self pity that he was experiencing and there is something about self pity that is always self-defeating.

I suppose that most of us carry a certain amount of envy in our hearts for some people. Sometimes we're aware of it; sometimes we're not. I can remember when I was in college - it was in my freshman year - and of how I had something of a feeling of feeling sorry for myself because I was associating with other students who had had so many of the material advantages that I had never had. They came from well-to-do-families who could afford to give them what they wanted. Some of them had automobiles. Their futures were bright. My parents - although not poor, nevertheless lived on a pretty tight budget. Surely, I reasoned, if I couldn't make anything out of my life, it wasn't my fault, and I thought it unfair to be denied the things the others received from their parents.

Or we say that the breaks have never come our way, and that luck has passed us by. Oh to be sure there's no doubt that at times a man has an advantage because he is in the right place at the right time. Even so, he has to have the right ability, the right equipment for the job. But I have concluded with the passing of the years that this is never a legitimate reason for success and failure. I think the breaks of life tend to even up and if I lose one today, I may gain one tomorrow. The man who depends on luck may come to a sad end. Or we may say that some get there because they have influential friends. No doubt a man in a strong position can do something for a friend from time to time. But mind you - no man can be held up very long by his friends; sooner or later he must produce and stand on his own two feet.

I suppose that if we can blame it on other people, we feel at ease because we are relieved of personal responsibility. Even in the church we find the same spirit of blaming everything that goes wrong on anything but ourselves. I grow weary of listening to alibis as to why we are not doing a better job and why we have failed to be a real influence in society. Sometimes those who have the most advice to offer in this regard are the hardest ones to pin down to some specific responsibility. Too busy. Other things more important. There can be no healing for us until we realize that so much of our ineffectiveness is within ourselves. The responsibility is our own. When church members fail to take seriously their commitment of time, talent, service and giving - the church is bound to be ineffective.

One of the most amazing things about the Bible is the way the familiar can never grow trite if we read with our eyes open. I was thinking about that as I reread the story of the Prodigal Son recently. ~~How many times have I read it? Hundreds? It is one of the most familiar passages of Scripture I know. Yet this time as I read the story something found me that I had never really noticed.~~ You will remember that when the young man had taken his inheritance and gone away into the far country, the time came when he was poor, hungry, and defeated. He was feeding swine, and that is about as low down as a man could get. Then he said that he would rise and go to his father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called you son. Treat me as one of your hidred servants'. Chances are - no modern boy would have said that. He would have said his trouble was his father's fault for being too strict or it was his mather's fault for making him go to church too much. Or, if he saw his psychiatrist, he might have been told he was the victim of a sibling rivalry. What a shocker it is to hear a person stand up and say, "I am to blame and the fault it my own". Do you suppose that this is the secret of the healing and the restoration? Is this perhaps the climax and the turning point of the story? Think about it and consider the possibility that there can be no salvation for us until we accept our own responsibility.

Perhaps you've heard the story about the young minister with an attractive wife who liked new clothes. She was always spending too much on clothes and they were constantly in debt. Finally, they had a council and discussed the matter. She agreed not to buy anything without first talking it over with her husband. She went to town several days later and came back with a new dress and the young minister said to her, "But dear....you promised..." And she replied, "I know I did, but the devil tempted me..." He answered, "But you should have said to the devil, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" "Oh" she answered, "I did and he whispered in my ear....'It fits so beautifully in the back!'". There has to come a time in life when we will not blame it on Satan or on anyone else, but accept our personal responsibility for our own condition - our own situation - whatever it may be. I think there is little hope for real inner growth until we do this.

PREFERENCE FOR SICKNESS
sickness.

Then a third thing to think about and this is rather shocking - a good many people have a preference for

Now this man had been there by the pool, sick, for thirty-eight years, which is really making a career out of your weakness. It wasn't a bad life. His friends brought him there in the morning and came for him at night. Theycity had provided shade from the sun and protection from the rain. Here he met his cronies and they would talk throughout the day. They watched other people going about their work and bearing their burdens which is always a pleasant recreation. After all

those years, in all honesty he was not anxious for a change. He may have had a preference for sickness.

We protest the evils we must endure, but do we really want them removed from us? One sickness of our society is war. Nobody wants war. We are unanimous in our hatred of war and our desire to be rid of it. But what about the things that go with war? What about the prosperity which grows out of our preparedness? What about all those industries that are tied with us defense projects? What about the business community and the profits that some receive in connection with military preparedness? If we hate war, many there are who like some of the things that war is apt to give us. It would be a good thing for someone to ask us as Jesus asked that man: "Do you really want to be healed?"

Or what about lung cancer. Is there any person who wants lung cancer? What a foolish question. But we do want something that the surgeon general has warned us may produce it. What a hard time we have had in getting a warning put inconspicuously on cigarettes. For this is a multi-million dollar business which means jobs and prosperity for many. The man caught in the habit will not break it, and while reading the warnings, he will count on the hope that he will be the exception. Somebody remarked recently that the new name for Forst Lawn Cemetery is Marlboro Country. We would rather joke about a disease than be healed of it.

I suppose there is always a certain amount of satisfaction in being relieved of responsibility. The invalid may develop a subtle psychology that takes delight in being free from the burdens other men have to carry. I want to be excused from carrying the heavy load. As long as I am waiting to be healed, I have a perfect reason for being excused. If I am sick you can be sure that no one will criticize me for following an easier path. One of the most dangerous temptations people face is to embrace an ailment as a way to escape life. Do we really want to be healed.

THE HEALING Now not all of the New Testament stories end happily, but this one did! When, at last, Jesus broke through the protective shell, through the defense mechanisms that the man had erected, through the pretense of the man's mind and helped him to see what he wanted, and what he needed - he was healed.

In effect Jesus said to him that he must make an effort to stand up and stop feeling sorry for himself, to stand up and stop waiting for an angel, for someone to wave a magic wand over him. Isn't it true that sometimes the hardest thing in life is making the initial effort, getting started, taking that first step. How long we postpone the decision. How long we delay the action. We are going to break a habit, but not until tomorrow. We are going to start something new, but not until a more convenient time. We are going to start back to school, but not until the next semester. We're going to join a church, but not just now - next time, later on. Tomorrow - or next week - we'll get started on it. We have good intentions, but we're so wonderful in putting things off.

But then there are times when the miracle occurs and in ways beyond our understanding, He says to us: "Stand up". "Get going". "Don't put it off". Perhaps there is some one person in the congregation today who needs to hear that word from Him. And if we take Him at his word and simply believe that now is the moment when we are on our way to being healed, to being helped. Take that "leap of faith" - believe that Christ can give you what you need, accept it, stand up, get started.

Somewhere in the Bible it says: according to our faith it shall be done unto us. According to our faith, we shall find the power, the strength, the healing, the endurance. What a great thing it is to know that the Great Physician is just as available to us as he was to the man by the pool to whom he said: "Rise. Take up thy bed, and walk".

PRAYER Conscious we are, O God, of our spiritual weakness. Speak to us in the silence of this place. Help us to renew our spiritual energies, and to become so grounded in the things that we really believe that when we face a difficult situation in life, with thy help, we shall stand on our own feet, and make our way steadily forward. In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen