

John 5:1-15

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] Lounging by the pool takes on a whole new meaning as we fix our attention on the sorry character described for us in the passage that we read in John chapter 5. We read there in verse 5, One who was there had been an invalid for 38 years. Just another miserable day of his altogether miserable life. This was miserable day, 13,870, give or take a couple of hundred. Not that he was counting. But this day, unbeknown to him, was a day that would end very differently to how it had begun. On this day, this man would meet Jesus. So, we have as the principal characters in this narrative, a miserable man and a merciful Messiah. On this day, at the pool of Bethesda, misery meets mercy. Or rather, mercy comes to the encounter of misery. Now, our greatest need this morning, as indeed on any morning, is to see Jesus, the merciful Messiah. But we will see him more clearly.

We will have a greater understanding of his mercy as we also meet the man that he came to the encounter of. So, let's do that this morning. In the light of the evidence before us in our passage, let's first meet this miserable man, let's meet him before then moving on to meet our merciful Messiah as he is portrayed to us in this passage. If I had to limit myself to three words to describe this man, I think the three words that I would choose would be afflicted, alone, and hopeless. No doubt we could think of many other adjectives that would fit. But these are the three that I think give us a good picture, if good's the right word, an accurate picture of this man. And I want to use these words as our markers as we meet him a little bit more closely. Afflicted, alone, and hopeless.

First of all, we can see very clearly that this was an afflicted man, and we can think about his affliction from two perspectives. We can think of or simply notice or describe the affliction itself, in as much as it is presented or described for us. But we can also ask the question, or at least ponder on the matter of the cause of his affliction. Now, when we go into the matter of the cause of affliction, and in this case of this particular man, things get more complicated, because there's a sense in which we don't know for sure or in detail what the cause is. But there is, in the passage, some indication that would allow us to come to some conclusions, even if they are tentative ones, concerning the cause of his affliction. But let's begin by considering the affliction itself. And we really can't go beyond the tragic description that is found in the text, there in verse 5.

Now, the word that is used here that speaks of him as an invalid is a word that could refer to some kind of paralysis. It certainly would apply to somebody who was lame and who was impeded, perhaps severely impeded in his movements. Indeed, the passage itself makes clear that that was the case with this man. That in verse 7, where he is replying to Jesus' question as to whether he wants to get well, he responds by recognizing that he is unable to get to the pool before others. His condition makes it impossible. His movements were impeded. He's not unable to move at all. Seemingly, he's able to make some kind of effort, but his condition doesn't allow him to get there in time as he sees it. So, this is the problem that he suffers from. But maybe the most sobering aspect of his affliction that we're told about is its duration. Thirty-eight long years he had suffered from this condition.

Well, we don't need to go any further in terms of the affliction itself. It's there before us in the passage. But what are the costs? In some ways, a more interesting question, but also a more delicate question to deal with carefully. Can we know? Can we know what the cause of his affliction was?

[5 : 40] Do we need to know? Is it important to know? We're going to be thinking about this passage again this evening, but from a very different perspective in terms of what lessons there are for us as we would seek to minister like the Master. And there we'll make the point that maybe it's not so important for us to delve into the causes of people's suffering. And maybe the question could be asked, well, is there any merit in doing so at all? Do we need to consider why he was so afflicted? Is it not just one of these things that happens in our broken world? Often it would be. Often today people suffer and there is a sense in which we can say, well, it's just one of these things. A consequence of living in a broken, fallen world.

But it seems that on this occasion, Jesus Himself points to a possible cause of this man's affliction.

Notice what happens following the man being healed. We have a second encounter between Jesus and the man. We're not told what time had elapsed between the first and the second. We presume not a great deal of time. But we read there in verse 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. Stop sinning. Sin no more.

Now, these words of Jesus would suggest, I think at the very least, suggest that the man's suffering was due to sin, to his own sin. He was suffering, so it would seem, because of his sin. Now we can, understandably, be very uncomfortable and wisely wary of reaching such a conclusion.

In any case of suffering, and we have to tread very carefully before coming to that kind of conclusion, we do, of course, reject any crude cause and effect theory of suffering that would attribute all suffering to the sin of the sufferer. We reject that primarily because Jesus Himself rejects such a crude manner of thinking in this very gospel. Just a couple of chapters along in chapter 9, where we have the account of the man born blind. Jesus very clearly and very deliberately rejects any such crude cause and effect manner of explaining suffering. Let's just remind ourselves of what He says there in chapter 9. As He went along, He saw a man blind from birth. The disciples asked Him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? And what does Jesus reply?

[8 : 46] Neither this man nor his parents sinned. And then He goes on and says important things. But for our purposes, that first part of Jesus' answer is eloquent. But though we vigorously reject any such crude understanding of cause and effect between personal sin and personal suffering, that does not mean that our afflictions, our suffering, can never be a direct consequence of our sin. Indeed, the Bible on different occasions makes it clear that that can be the case. And it would seem that it was the case with this man. And of course, the stark but inescapable reality is that sin does result in suffering for ourselves and others. Though again, at the risk of repeating myself unnecessarily, we do stress that not all suffering is the direct consequence of personal sin. Some is. And it would seem that in this case, that is the explanation that Jesus Himself identifies. So, this is an afflicted man, a man who has suffered for 38 years as a consequence of events we would imagine in a dim and distant past of his sorry life.

And we need to recognize, very sadly recognize, that in this He is not so different from many today. Many today who endlessly suffer the consequences of past wrongs, be it wrongs that they were the perpetrators of, or in many cases, wrongs that they were the victims of. And the suffering and the hurt and the wounds of those circumstances continue to shadow them and to plague them year after year, and yes, even decade after decade. It may not be, indeed often and ordinarily it will not be, physical paralysis, as was the case with this man. But how many are not suffering from spiritual and emotional, relational paralysis in need of healing and liberation? Maybe you can relate to this man more than you would care to publicly acknowledge. This man was an afflicted man.

But we can also describe him as a man who was alone. He was afflicted and he was alone. I would suggest, you may think differently, but I would suggest that more poignant and tragic, even than his affliction, was one of the consequences of his affliction, that he was alone. He was very alone. It's difficult to find sadder words than those from the lips of this man as they're recorded for us in verse 7.

I have no one to help me. I have no one to help me. No one. No one at all. Just let that sink in for a moment. Just think about this man and where he was and how he sadly and pitifully, but very honestly, honestly, says to Jesus, I have no one. I have no one to help me. Here is a man in desperate need, positioned in one of the busiest spots in the whole of Jerusalem, and yet he is alone. So very alone.

He has no one to turn to. No one he can trust. No one who cares. He's alone. Now, we might say, well, yes, that's very tragic, but that's an extreme case. There aren't many people like that.

[12 : 54] Not many people so alone as this man would appear to be. But is it really such an extreme circumstance that this man finds himself in? If we can put it this way, and it's a bit of a tongue twister, this man is not alone in being alone. I would wager that within a stone's throw of this building, now I don't know how far you can throw a stone, but let's just think of an average capacity to throw a stone. Within a stone's throw of this building, there are countless men and women who in this regard are not so different from this man alone, perhaps even gathered here this morning.

It is a desperate thing to be alone. God knew what He was about when He declared at the dawn of human existence, it's not good for the man to be alone. This man was afflicted, this man was alone, and these things follow one from the other. Of course, this man I think we can reasonably describe as hopeless. Hopeless in the sense of his own perception of his circumstances as being devoid of any meaningful hope. We know that taking a step back and looking at the big picture, his situation wasn't hopeless. The events confirmed that it was far from hopeless, but in terms of his own perception of his circumstances, he can see no reason, no grounds for any meaningful hope. There is an evidence of desire to be healed. His rather pathetic and pitiful attempt to reach the pool testifies to desire. We've noticed that already as we were just thinking about his affliction. There was this idea. I think we can probably safely describe it as a superstition.

There are different views on that, but it seems reasonable to think that this was a superstition that there was, that when the pool moved for whatever reason, if you could get there first, you would be healed. And well, he had bought into this. But of course, he never managed to get there.

He wanted to. There was some desire to be healed. But I don't think there was any hope that it would actually ever happen. He seems to have lost any real hope. His answer to the question that Jesus poses, I think, leads us to that, if it needs to be, tentative conclusion. You see, Jesus says to him there at the end of verse 6, do you want to get well? And he doesn't answer with an unambiguous, yes, that's what I want more than anything else. But rather what he does is lament his hopeless circumstances. This is as if he's saying, well, yes, well, of course I want to get well, but there's no chance of that happening. Of course I don't want to be suffering like I'm suffering. What kind of question is that? But there's no actual hope that my circumstances will change. It's not possible.

There's no expectation of a positive outcome. No hope. No hope that Jesus is in any condition to change things for him. He doesn't even know who Jesus is, this man asking him the silly question.

[16 : 25] Well, if 38 years have passed without this man making it to the pool at the head of the queue, what realistic hope is there of that ever happening? And of course, even if he did, would he actually have been healed? This man is hopeless, and you could argue that he has every reason to be. An objective look at his circumstances reasonably leads him to be as he is, hopeless.

What a terribly sad picture that John paints for us, an afflicted, lonely, hopeless man. But such a man in such circumstances only serves to sharpen our appreciation of our merciful Messiah. What can we say of Jesus as he is portrayed for us in this account? Well, again, allow me to order my thoughts with the help of three words that we can say of Jesus. Jesus is concerned, he's willing, and he's able.

Jesus is concerned. What do we read there in verse 6? When Jesus saw him lying there. Jesus saw this anonymous man, this man lost in the sea of human affliction that was the pool called Bethesda. This man who had become part of the furniture at the poolside, nothing more than a human deck chair, but less useful, unloved, uncared for, unnoticed. This man, this man was seen by Jesus.

His eyes of compassion fixed their gaze on this sorry man. At the pool of mercy, where mercy was the scarcest of commodities, eyes of mercy rests on an afflicted man. Jesus saw and Jesus knew.

We read there, when Jesus saw him lying there and learned. He had been in the condition for a long time. The word or the verb that we have translated there, learned. It's really the word that at its most basic simply means to know. Depending on context, it's legitimate to translate it in the manner that it is translated in our version, but it seems to me that on this occasion the word know is more helpful. Jesus saw and Jesus knew.

[19 : 07] The question, of course, in choosing between these verbs and either are legitimate, the question really is how did he know? Did he learn by inquiry? Did he ask others concerning this man? And of course, he could have done. But it seems to me, more likely, that that is not how he knew of this man's condition and how long he had been in this condition. That's not how he knew these things. Rather, this was an insight that was his, given his identity as the eternal Son of God. He knew. He saw and he knew. He knew this man's condition. He knew the cause and the duration of it. We perhaps have to be tentative in the matter of cause. He didn't need to be tentative. He knew. He knew the man's spirit. He knew the man's heart.

He saw and he knew. And let's be very clear that as concerns Jesus, nothing has changed. He knows you.

Perhaps as you keep your head down in the midst of the crowd, perhaps as you really do a marvelous job of giving the impression that all is well. He knows. He knows you. He saw and he knew. And of course, this seeing and this knowing of Jesus speaks of the concern that he had for this man. Jesus was concerned. But he was more than just concerned. He was also willing. His knowledge and his concern needs must find expression in a desire or willingness to help. And they do. He asked this question of the man, do you want to get well? Now, this question and what may or may not lie behind it has been the subject of countless suggestions. But ultimately, what it definitively reveals is that Jesus is willing to make him well. Jesus wants to heal him. Jesus has determined to heal him. And the question is simply one way of Jesus offering his assistance. Do you want to get well? The implication is, I'm able, I'm willing.

Do you want to get well? That's the manner in which he, if you wish, offers his assistance. Now, it is sometimes suggested. I've said that many things are suggested lie behind this question. But one of the things that is sometimes suggested is that there is in the question the implication that in order for the man to be healed, a necessary precondition is that he must desire such healing. You can see, kind of, the logic behind that.

Do you want to get well? And so, it is concluded that without the desire, then the outcome would not happen. And if you take that further and take that to its logical conclusion, you could perhaps argue that without the desire, Jesus is unable, or if not unable, that's maybe too strong a word, but certainly you might conclude that Jesus is not disposed to help anybody unless there's the desire that some would argue from this passage is a necessary condition, or at least on this occasion was a necessary condition. Let me just quote from one commentator who often is very useful in commenting on the Gospels, William Barclay. He says with regard to this question that Jesus poses, the first essential towards receiving the power of Jesus is the intense desire for it. I don't think so. Certainly not from this passage. You see, on this occasion, it's quite the reverse. This man gives no evidence of any desire to be healed by Jesus. This man gives no evidence of any faith or expectation that Jesus is either willing or able to do so. It is Jesus, a willing Jesus, who takes the initiative in the absence of any cry for help, any expressed desire for assistance, or any faith in a favorable outcome. Jesus is willing, and thank God that Jesus is still willing. He is willing to save, yes, to save even the unwilling.

[23 : 50] Jesus is concerned. Jesus is willing. But finally, Jesus is able. Now, we might be concerned in the face of tragedy, some more than others. We're confronted with a tragic situation, somebody in tragic circumstances, and we're concerned as we learn of what it is that they're suffering from. There may even be in us, and I hope there is, a willingness up to a point to help, to extend a hand. But are we always able to help? Of course, we know the answer to that question. So often, we are not able. But not so with Jesus. Jesus is supremely able. What does He say to the man who had been lying there for all this time, maybe not in the same spot all these years, but certainly been suffering for all these years?

What does He say to him? Get up. Get up. It's just one word that Jesus would have used. He goes on to say other things, but the heart of the matter in terms of the healing of this man is this one word that He addresses to this man, get up. And that one word is more than enough. With one word, He brings to an end 38 years of affliction. With one word, He dispels the man's sorry conclusion that He had no one to help. With one word, He infuses new power and vigor and health and well-being into the man's withered limbs. Just one word. Do you remember the centurion whose servant was sick and about to die? We read of him in Luke's gospel, also in Mark's gospel. Do you remember that man? He knew that one word was enough.

What was the message that the centurion sent to Jesus concerning His dying servant? This was the message. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. Just say the word. You don't need to come.

You don't need to see Him. You don't need to touch Him. Just say the word and my servant will be healed. Not. Jesus is able. He's supremely able. Do you believe that? If you do believe that, you can do what this man didn't do. You can call out to Jesus on your own behalf. You can call out to Jesus on behalf of others, like the centurion. Just say the word. Now, when Jesus will say the word lies within His own divine prerogative in a providence, we may struggle to understand. This man had to wait thirty-eight years. But Jesus said the word, and the man was healed. This is Jesus. This is our merciful Messiah. The one who is concerned. The one who is concerned for you. The one who is willing. The one who takes the initiative and who delights in mercy. This is Jesus. The one who is able. Supremely able.

Whatever your affliction, however longstanding, however hopeless. Mercy met misery by the pool of Bethesda some 2,000 years ago. And mercy still comes to the encounter of misery. Yes, even in Aberdeen today. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come. We thank you for your word. We thank you that when we see Jesus, we see you. When we see Jesus as the one who is concerned and willing and able, we can rightly conclude that you, our Heavenly Father, are concerned, willing, and able. And we praise you for it. We thank you for it. We thank you that you overcome our unbelief. You overcome our unwillingness. You overcome our hopelessness. We pray that we would know something of that faith that is persuaded that when you just say the word, what you say, what you order, what you command happens.

[28 : 47] And all of these things we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. We're going to sing again. We're going to sing from Psalm 72. We sang the first nine verses before the sermon. Now we're going to continue singing, but we'll continue singing from verse 11. Psalm 72, on page 93, we'll sing verses 11 to 14, and then we'll skip a couple of verses and sing from verse 17 to 19. So verses 11 to 14, and then verses 17 to 19. We'll sing these verses to the tune at Duke Street.

All kings will humbly bow to Him, and nations worship Him with fear. He'll save the needy when they call, all the poor, all the poor, all the poor, for whom no help is near. Psalm 72, verses 11 to 14, and 17 to 19, and we'll stand to sing.

All kings will pass the Lord to Him, and nations worship Him with fear. He'll save the needy when they call, when they call, the poor, for whom no help is near. He'll save the needy when they call, the poor, for whom no help is near.

He'll save the needy on the weep, and save them from oppressive might. He'll save them from violence. He'll save them from violence.

He'll save them from violence. Their blood is precious in His sight.

[30 : 46] For whom no help is near. He'll save them from!... He'll save them from ■■■■■ cied document. On Trinity to ■■■, the Holy Spirit drop its Phoebe ■■■■ lahem, and stars, the wicked veiled seed from these regimes. The evidence of the ■■■ masa really jobbar, Amnesty to ■■■■ we bodice? National Healthy initiatives are true in His steps without having mockery and the peace. For the book of God is todo blessed prayed.

The power of God is todo esteemed, and may call, to warn us above. Praise to the Lord, to Israel's child, His awesome deeds proclaim to men.

His name be praised eternally, His glory fill the earth. Amen.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always. Amen.