

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part nineteen

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THE DELIBERATELY PROVOCATIVE GRACE OF JESUS

John 5:1-17 - "After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.[2] Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. [3] In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. [4] - [5] One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. [6] When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" [7] 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 going another steps down before me." [8] Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." [9] And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath. [10] So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed." [11] But he answered them, "The man who healed me, that man said to me, 'Take up your bed, and walk.' " [12] They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk?'" [13] Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. [14] Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you." [15] The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. [16] And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. [17] But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

This text records the *third* of *eight signs* that John records in his account. And John means for us to take note of an important corner being turned in his gospel record. From this point on you will see *two separate story lines beginning to diverge and gain momentum*. John tells us up front that he records these signs to build faith in Jesus, the Messiah, God the Son. He writes his whole account so we might *"believe"* in Jesus and find *"life in His name"* - **John 20:30-31** - "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

This is the bright story line of John's gospel. But there's a darker thread as well. John has already told all careful readers that *faith* and *life* are not going to be the *only* responses to Father God's redeeming revelation in Jesus Christ, the word made flesh. People will *polarize* around Jesus. He will be the great *dividing point* running through mankind. Not everyone will find life. Some will *reject*. Some will remain under divine *wrath*:

John 1:10-11 - "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. [11] He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."

John 3:36 - "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

The church will never make sense of the different reactions to the gospel in this world if she forgets these two ideas in the New Testament. We will not just get *one* reaction to our commitment to Christ in this world. Not everyone will treasure the gospel that has changed our lives. If we begin to gauge the worth of the gospel by the reaction of those who mock its truth we will have a very shaky foundation for our own faith. We are *told in advance* that many - perhaps *most* - of the people with whom we rub shoulders will find our faith ridiculous, and certainly, in terms of political correctness, socially offensive. Remember, we're *told* about this so we will *expect* it and see the fulfillment of Scripture in it.

All of this long introduction is to say *this* is what John brings to the fore in this third sign in his gospel account. Not everyone reacted the same way to John's recorded signs. And this text - this account of the *third sign* in John's gospel - is the first specific incident of *rejection - push back* - against the grace manifested in Jesus Christ. John starts to give specific examples of the principle in **John 1:11** - "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."

1) **THERE IS SOMETHING PARTICULARLY TENDER IN THE WAY JESUS REACHED OUT TO THIS LAME MAN**

John 5:1-7 - "After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. [2] Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. [3] In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. [4] [5] One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. [6] When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" [7] 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 going another steps down before me."

I try hard to not be just mellow dramatic in dealing with Biblical texts. But I don't think I'm stretching John's meaning when I point out the contrast between John's emphasis on the "**multitude**" of invalids (**verse 3**) and the "**one man**" (**verse 5**).

Why didn't Jesus heal **everyone** by that pool that day? Or why didn't he touch at least a couple dozen? And the answer is, we don't know. But I think we **do** know why Jesus was somehow drawn to the **one man** He **did** touch and heal - **verse 6** - "**When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time**, he said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?'"

John tells us Jesus was drawn to this man **because** He took into consideration the **length of this man's misery**. Everyone knows **duration** adds weight to **suffering**. **Hopelessness** piles up on top of **hurt**. Discouragement grows over time.

Consider this. While there is certainly much speculation about the placing of **verse 4** and exactly what it is all about, what we know for sure is John tells us that for **38 years** not one person helped this lame man into that pool - **not ever**. We know that for **38 years** everyone else raced past this man, ignoring his needs in search of their own welfare.

What does it do to a person of urgent need to be passed over for a whole life time? What kind of future expectation does this man have? What view has formed of his fellow-man in the last 38 years? What questions formed about the goodness of God and the fairness of life?

All we know for sure, from the wonderful detail John includes in his account, is as Jesus looked over this teeming sea of broken humanity He saw one man more hopelessly sunken than all the others - one man in the whole crowd who seemed **least likely** to have anything about his situation changed for the better - the most **hopeless** cripple in the bunch - and John says, "**There! That's why Jesus was drawn to that one man!**"

And if Jesus had just quickly waved His hand over the masses and pronounced them **all** healed (and who would ever doubt that He **could** have done that?) - if He **had** we would have forever **missed** this greater revelation of our Lord's compassion for those who feel the most hopeless of all. **This man** seemed the most **locked into his present situation**. Jesus greatly desires to change the most **unchangeable**. This gives the most hope to everyone else as well.

Just on the side, notice the strange question Jesus asks of this lame man in **verse 6** - "**When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be healed?'**" And most of us would say, "Are you kidding? **Of course** he wants to be healed! After 38 lame years, who wouldn't?"

And I hope you don't think me uncompassionate when I tell you living a long time **without the touch of grace on your life** frequently changes the way people look to God in the future. People who need God's help in some special way - not **just** physical healing - can go through phases of dealing with their broken situations. They can move from **expecting** God to touch - to **desiring** God to touch - to **getting used to** God not meeting their expectations - to **not wanting anything to do with God** because Christianity didn't work for them.

And it's so true to a very basic spiritual law of life that before Jesus touches this lame man's legs He talks to the state of his heart. It's a mistake to assume our **inward desires** are always God honoring and in order. We can be spiritually lame **inwardly** and totally unready for transforming grace when it stares us in the face.

2) THE SAME MIRACLE THAT BROUGHT GRACE TO THE LAME MAN AROUSED HATRED IN THE JEWISH LEADERS

John 5:8-9, 18 - "Jesus said to him, "Get up, take up your bed, and walk." [9] And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and walked. Now that day was the Sabbath.....18....This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to

kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

Healing and hatred, just verses apart. Same sign. Different effects. Nowhere is this warped response to Jesus’ grace more obvious than in the laughable question “*the Jews*” asked the healed man in **verse 12** - “They asked him, **Who is the man who said to you, 'Take up your bed and walk'?**” Are you kidding me? Not, “**Who healed you with such incredible power?**”, but, “**Who told you to take up your bed?**”

There is something seriously wrong here. We are reading words of ***incredible blindness***. We’re beholding people grown ***numb*** to God working among them.

Years ago, an aged ***G. Campbell Morgan*** wrote these simple, profound words - “***On the human level, what Jesus did that day*** (in healing the lame man) ***and what He said that day, cost Him His life. They never forgave Him.***”

And this leads to another interesting fact in John’s gospel. Why did Jesus heal ***so many*** people on the Sabbath? In terms of the miracles of healing we have ***recorded*** (and we know John says we only have a fraction of all Jesus did) - but of the ***recorded*** healing miracles, it is a fact that ***most*** of them were performed by Jesus on the Sabbath.

So what is Jesus trying to do here? Why not just ask the people to come back the next day? This is especially probing when we remember Jesus ***knew in advance*** the kind of reaction He was going to get from His ministry.

And the answer is found in remembering John records these miracles as ***signs***. They ***point*** to something. And what they point to is Jesus as the ***fulfillment*** of all the Jewish religious system. In other words, Jesus is being ***deliberately provocative*** in His healing of this lame man. That’s why He told the man to **take up his bed and walk**. Why take up his bed? Certainly Jesus could have just healed the man. Everyone would have known this man was healed just by seeing him walk for the first time in 38 years. There would have been no questioning of the miracle. Why does Jesus tell him to ***take up his bed?***

Carrying things was specifically forbidden on the Sabbath - **Jeremiah 17:21** - “***Thus says the Lord: Take care for the sake of your lives, and do not bear a burden on the Sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem.***”

So, yes, Jesus knows He is setting up a controversy here. He knows He is forcing the issue of the keeping of the Old Covenant in His words to the lame man. He is showing the religious community - and the whole world since - that He is the ***completion*** of legal religion. He is the One to whom all those regulations and separations merely pointed.

This third healing sign will give Jesus the opportunity to enter into the only debate that matters with the whole religious community. They will be forced to engage the light of the world. Their Spiritual darkness will be exposed as the ***real*** healing that needs to take place. They will be forced to deal with ***who Jesus claimed to be***.

3) **FRESH GRACE LEADS TO A NEW LIFE**

John 5:10-14 - “So the Jews said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to take up your bed.” [11] But he answered them, “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’” [12] They asked him, “Who is the man who said to you, ‘Take up your bed and walk?’” [13] Now the man who had been healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had withdrawn, as there was a crowd in the place. [14] Afterward **Jesus found him in the temple** and said to him, “**See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.**”

It is good that Jesus found this man in the temple after his healing. One assumes he was there giving thanks to God for his new found health and strength. There are many who receive grace in different forms and blindly go on in the very same life, attributing God’s goodness to nothing more than a “***good break***.” This man draws near to God.

Then we have to come to terms with these blunt word from Jesus, the One who healed him - **John 5:14** - “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, **See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.**”

What are we to make of this? Was Jesus telling this man that his ***sin*** was the cause of his lameness? Was Jesus saying sin is ***always*** the cause of sickness?

We know this isn't the case because of Jesus' teaching later in this very gospel - **John 9:1-3** - "As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. [2] And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" [3] Jesus answered, it was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

So, no. There is no straight line correlation between personal sickness and personal sin. All sickness entered the world through sin and the Fall. But not every person who gets sick is being punished for some sin.

What, then, is the meaning of Jesus' stern words to this lame man? Actually, Jesus never says this lameness was the result of some personal sin. Whatever questions we might raise, that conclusion isn't in our text. What Jesus **does** say - and what I think He **intends** to say - is **divine grace received is meant to manifest itself in a new life lived.**

Grace - **any form of grace** - is given freely. It is always an act of the most extreme kindness. But, while it is never **earned**, it is always **transforming** in the one receiving it. Grace comes like electricity comes. It carries power. It's morally engaging. It draws the recipient more tightly to God, the grace giver.

And the church needs to re-think these firm words from the healing Jesus. It is easy to confuse a gracious God with a heavenly genie. It's easy to measure Christianity by how many of your problems it solves while leaving your moral choices totally in your own hands. Like God just pays your Visa bill and lets you keep spending as you like.

And, of course, you're right. Christianity **doesn't** work that way. But that's not because Christianity doesn't work. It's because what you're trying to do with God's grace has nothing whatsoever to do with Biblical Christianity.