Exploring the Bible—Gospel of John (6)

The Need of the Impotent

**Scripture Reading:**

2 Now there is in Jerusalem near the sheepgate a pool, which is called in Hebrew Bethesda, having five porticoes. 3 In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, waiting for the moving of the water. 4 For an angel went down from time to time in the pool and stirred up the water; the first then to step in after the stirring up of the water was made well of whatever disease he was being held by. 5 And a certain man was there, who had been thirty-eight years in his sickness. 6 When Jesus saw this one lying there and knew that he had already been a long time in that condition, He said to him, Do you want to get well? 7 The sick man answered Him, Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me. 8 Jesus said to him, Rise, take up your mat and walk. 9 And immediately the man became well, and he took up his mat and walked. (John 5:2-9)

**Ministry Reading:**

THE IMPOTENT

The Lord Jesus can meet and supply the needs of all kinds of people. In human society there is another kind of people: the impotent. People who are impotent know what they should do, but they do not have the strength to carry it out. They know that they should do good, and they are willing to do good, but they have no strength to do good. The Lord Jesus can also meet the need of such people. The man in John 5 was impotent because he had been sick for a long time. He was so sick that his entire body was weak and unable to move.

This man was not only sick and weak but also lonely. He was lying by the pool with the hope that he would be healed. However, he lacked the strength to be healed, and no one came to help him. As a result, he remained in a miserable and helpless condition.

Such an impotent and helpless man is a symbol of numerous people who are impotent, lacking strength. His miserable condition is a portrait of many people who do not have the strength to free themselves from their problems. This man represents all the impotent people in the world. Therefore, when we consider his condition, we are actually considering the condition of all the impotent people in the world. This is also our condition, because every one of us is impotent.

HAVING A WAY BUT NO STRENGTH

People are unable to break away from their sickness, because they are impotent. They are unable to deal with a small problem, and they are unable to drop a small habit. This is called impotence, a lack of strength. It is not that there is no way to be freed. There is a way, but there is no strength. There is a method, but there is no strength.

The impotent man had been sick for thirty-eight years, but he was not without a way to be healed. In front of him was a healing pool. From time to time the water in the pool was stirred up, and the first person to step in the pool was healed (v. 4). This is a wonderful way of healing. However, this man was so weak that he did not have the strength to take this way of healing. He could not step into the pool before others, because he had no strength. As a result, he could not be healed. As far as he was concerned, there was a way to be healed, but he lacked the strength to take that way.

Is this not the condition of many people in the world? Many people have a way of salvation, but they do not have the strength to be saved. The people in Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, and Buddhism have a “way of salvation,” but they do not have the strength to obtain the salvation that they seek. Although these ways are unreliable, these people still do not have the strength to obtain the salvation that they desire. For example, the way of salvation in Judaism is to keep the law of God. The way of salvation in Confucianism is to cultivate one’s morality and character. Even though these ways of salvation are not reliable, people do not have the strength to obtain the salvation that they desire. People in the world are seeking salvation in morality. They have a way, but they do not have the strength.

It was during a feast that the Lord met the man who had been sick for thirty-eight years (v. 1). A feast is a day when everyone is joyful. However, let us consider this man who was sick for thirty-eight years. On the day of a joyful feast was he joyful? His condition can be described as having no joy on a joyful day. Others might have been joyful, but he could not be joyful, because he was a sick, weak, and lonely man with a serious illness. Furthermore, his desire to be healed had not been fulfilled. Not only was it during a feast that the Lord Jesus met this man who had been sick for thirty-eight years; it was also on the Sabbath (v. 9). This man was lying on a mat (vv. 6, 8). We should consider whether this man had peace in his heart. He was lying on his mat on the Sabbath, but he had no peace or rest in his heart. His outward environment was peaceful, but his heart was not at peace, because he had not been healed of his sickness, and his need had not been met.

AN EMPTY HOPE AND A REAL NEED

This man, who had been sick for thirty-eight years, hoped that he could be healed in the pool (v. 7). He hoped that he would have the strength to take the way of healing in the pool. His hopes, however, were empty and not realistic, because he did not have the strength to carry out the way of healing in the pool.

From the Lord’s perspective, the impotent man was a dead man; he was in death. From our perspective, he was sick. The impotent man also felt that he was sick. However, from the Lord’s perspective, this man was not sick but dead, because being sick and weak indicates death. A person becomes sick and weak because death is in him. Death is the source of sickness and weakness, and it is the ultimate expression of sickness and weakness. Sickness and weakness come from death; they are the precursors of death, and they bring in death.

Self-cultivation, teaching, outward methods, and human efforts cannot remove death from within man, nor can they make man living. Only life—not self-cultivation, teaching, methods or human efforts—can remove death from man and enliven man. Hence, our need is life. We have suffered from deadly poison and have sustained deadly wounds. We are dead because of sin, we are dead in sin, we are impotent because of death, and we sin. We cannot break away from sin. Our need is not human teaching or our effort; our need is to be enlivened. No method can extract the deadly poison within us or heal our deadly wounds. No effort can remove the element of death in us or turn back the harm of death in us. Only a living, powerful, and death-overcoming life can swallow up the death in us, giving us the deliverance of life and the healing of life. Such a life is what we, the impotent who are struggling in death, truly need. Such a life, however, cannot be received by any method or exertion, nor is it given by religion.

The Lord Jesus saw the man who had been sick for thirty-eight years lying by the pool and asked him if he wanted to get well. The impotent man thought that the Lord was telling him about the old way of entering into the pool to receive healing. He did not realize that the Lord was going to save him without a method and without his own effort. When he said that he did not have the strength to enter into the pool, the Lord immediately said, “Rise, take up your mat and walk.” These wonderful words mean that this man did not need the pool. He did not need a method, nor did he need his effort or strength. He simply needed to receive the Lord’s word. The Lord’s word has power because the Lord’s word contains life. When the impotent man heard the Lord’s word, he was immediately made well, and he took up his mat and walked. This was not the effect of a method, nor was it the issue of his efforts. Rather, this is the Lord’s salvation of life.

Question for Discussion: What is the difference between human way and divine life? Share your experience.

Reference: *Changing Death into Life,* Ch. 4.