

Saved or Lost?

by

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SERMON TWO

A MAN'S ONE CHANCE TO BE SAVED

John 5:1-9

THE story here recorded is one that appeals to the imagination and should profoundly influence the will. Its several suggestions, let us set in order. To three of these, at least, I invite your thought: The Anxious Impotent; The Annual Opportunity, and The Immediate Healing.

I. THE ANXIOUS IMPOTENT.

“After this, there was a feast of the Jews; and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is at Jerusalem, by the sheep market, a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water” (vss. 1-3).

They were a multitude in number.

That is forever true of the ailing. A large proportion of the race suffers from physical afflictions. Civilization has made marvelous changes in the conditions of human existence.

- It has studied the relation of cleanliness to health and reduced it to a science;
- It has examined all possible food stuffs with the view of selecting the most nutritious;
- It has developed surgery into a science, and yet almost the outstanding institutions of the city and of the state are its hospitals — its places for the sick.

With all our marked improvements it is very doubtful indeed if we have had any great victory over disease; it is even a question whether new forms of affliction do not develop more rapidly than do efficient measures for meeting them.

If one considers the inmates of rest homes, hospitals, homes for the infirm, and asylums for the insane, and then adds the mighty number who are cared for by friends and families, it would, upon publication, stagger the imagination! This fact not only accounts for the innumerable company of young men and women who elect to be doctors of some sort, or practical or professional nurses, but it also excites the cupidity of fake healers and tempts the “racketeer” to make unreasonable promises and unholy profit.

Sin is the commonest thing in all the world, but almost a close second is sickness. The perfectly healthy man or woman is but rarely met; the physically deficient are “**a multitude which no man can number.**” Times, then, are not changed so much. We can say of our centers to which the sick flock as was said of the porches at Bethesda: “**In these lie a great multitude of impotent folk.**”

They represented many ailments.

The few here mentioned are merely samples—“blind,” “halt,” “withered.” Modern medicine has made heavy drafts upon the Latin and Greek languages for words to use in connection with disease, but to those who know these languages the names are appropriate enough; they are commonly descriptive of the ailment involved. However, to the uninitiated they merely suffice to stimulate fear, and justify a return visit of the physician.

Years ago I was in the office of Dr. F. T. Riley, my oldest brother, when a fellow-physician came in, and my brother inquired concerning one of the visitor’s patients and was answered by a Latin lingo that made me sit up and take notice.

I was surprised and thought the man of whom they talked must be in a frightfully bad way; but after the visitor had left the office, my brother smilingly looked at me and said: “What he meant by all that was that the fellow had a touch of lumbago!”

But if we kept to the common names, God knows there are enough. When Christ was in the world He had to do with the nobleman’s son who was sick; He faced, to help, the demon-possessed; His touch healed the woman with an issue of blood; to Him the blind came; across His path were found the paralytics; from a distance He heard the cry of the leper; to Him came the report of Peter’s wife’s mother, “sick of a fever”; here, we have the impotent; there, the man with the withered hand; yonder, the woman with the spirit of infirmity; the man with dropsy; the deaf; the dumb; the lunatic; the wounded.

But these general terms are now laid aside and distinguishing names multiply the variety of diseases almost beyond number.

Physical sufferings have their spiritual counterpart. Who can name the varied forms of sin? The Ten Commandments were intended to compass them all, by way of warning, and yet under each of those commandments you would find a thousand separate and different violations.

How good the thought that Christ, the Great Physician, was not a specialist, simply treating one particular feature of the human frame, or one disorder of its organization, but was adequate to all! So in the spiritual realm. “**All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven**” because He became a propitiation for all, and is able to save from all, all them who by Faith receive Him.

Robert F. Horton, the English Higher Critic, once said: “Without forming any theory about sin, Jesus treats it as a blindness of the soul.”

Yes, He did so treat it, but He also treated sin as a spiritual leprosy; He also thought of sin as soul-impotence; He also conceived of sin as a cancerous spirit; to Him sin was the very Satanic substance of which a thousand forms of sickness were the symbol.

Thank God that this Great Physician Who came to heal the sick, came also as a Savior from all sin! And we have the blessed truth that “**the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin**”—(I John 1:7)—no matter what its form, no matter what malignant feature it assumes! His touch is health! To each who comes to Him for spiritual health, He says, as He did to the leper of old: “**I will; be thou clean**” (Matthew 8:3).

This multitude was motivated by a common hope.

They came to the porches of Bethesda because a report had reached them that once a year an angel came into the waters of Bethesda’s pool and stirred the same, and whosoever went down first was healed.

In all the observations of life there are very few that reveal any purpose more regnant than that of possessing health if possible.

Some weeks ago in Florida, as we followed the Tamammi trail from Miami to Tampa, we passed, fourteen miles southeast of Venice, a sign-board which read: “One and one-half miles to Mineral Springs.”

On inquiry, I found that this marvelous spring threw from its vein seventeen thousand gallons of water a minute; that that water had no less than fifteen to twenty chemical ingredients in it; that its temperature never changed—seventy-six degrees in winter and summer; and that it was far-famed for its curative properties.

I asked our host if it would be too much out of the way to drive by the same, and he said, “Certainly not.”

In a few minutes we stood by the side of the great pool associated with this vein. It was probably one hundred yards across, and while there was a sand-covered rock ledge that led out a distance of seventy-five to one hundred feet, beyond that there was a drop-off which some declared contained a pocket two hundred feet or more in depth.

This spring is owned by a wealthy woman of Philadelphia who refuses to sell it at any price because she wants the poor to have free and eternal access to the same, without charge.

Round about it we found fifteen to twenty trailer houses in which people were living, that they might daily take the baths. I asked the woman in charge of the towels and the shack of a dressing-room how many people visited it daily and she said: “I don’t know, but yesterday I gave out one hundred thirty-six towels to those who came for a dip.”

And all these people are motivated by a common hope— the hope of regained health.

I am told that some twenty miles out of Toronto, Canada, there is one Dr. Locke who, by a strange foot manipulation, professes to cure a multitude of diseases, and I also have it on good authority that there are days in which not less than two thousand to four thousand people arrive at his clinic, and that the poor and the rich, people who come afoot and those who come in the highest priced cars, mingle in a common crowd, motivated by a common hope—the hope of restored health.

But we pass from The Anxious Impotent to

II. THE ANNUAL OPPORTUNITY.

“For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.

“When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole? The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me” (vss. 4-7).

This is a pathetic story, and yet a most significant one! And it is rich with suggestion.

First, this opportunity merely mocked the impotent man.

He could not make his way into the waters of himself. Doubtless he had tried; his very language would indicate that he had struggled hard, expending the last ounce of energy to wriggle there and fall in, but he had failed! How marvelously symbolic!

A man smitten with sin cannot save himself. At times he ardently desires it; and, as he himself will tell you, struggles to accomplish it; but never is a sinner successful in self-salvation.

That is a point at which Kagawa's philosophy is utterly false. He teaches that a man saves himself. He says: “To love other men enough to be willing to pour out your blood for them, this is the acme of spiritual love. Such love has the power to redeem.”

That is identical with the doctrine of the “Supreme Sacrifice” by which many of the soldiers of the late War were led to hope for heaven in spite of unholy lives.

The Scriptures teach that an unsaved sinner is “**dead in trespasses and sins**” and a dead man can do nothing by which he can regain life.

The physical impotence of this man is a type of the spiritual impotence of every unsaved soul.

The passing by of Jesus was his one chance.

It is doubtful if he knew who Jesus was; but it is blessed to see the Master make his acquaintance. How significant that, also! There is never an hour, nor is there a spot in the world without the presence of Jesus; but the blind, the halt, the lame are often ignorant of the same, and, notwithstanding their desperate need, know not that help is at hand.

That is the necessity of preaching—to make Jesus known; that is the necessity of bearing personal testimony, of passing out tracts, of singing songs—to make Jesus known. And when one becomes conscious of Him, of His Presence, and of His power to save, that is the sinner's chance, and, sometimes, it is his first, last, and only chance.

When I was pastor at New Albany, Ind., I preached a sermon one Sunday morning that moved the hearts of many, and a number came forward, accepted Christ, and openly confessed Him. I noticed that the soprano in the choir was deeply concerned; tears were on her face; her lips were quivering; a mighty inner struggle was evidenced in these outward signs. I had a second hymn sung, multiplied my appeals, but when courtesy demanded a close of the service she still sat in her place.

I went to her and said: "Why didn't you come this morning?"

Her answer was: "I ought to have done so, but I will soon."

During the rest of my pastorate there I talked with her many times and always had the same answer. Sadly she would reply: "I missed my chance that morning!"

There are some of you who are having your chance today. Embrace it, I pray you, in this very hour.

Christ's interest is the ground of good hope.

"When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?" (vs. 6)

Christ never passed a sick man in indifference; and Christ never passes an unsaved soul with indifference. Whether or not you are interested in Him, He is interested in you.

Oh, how I wish the hymn that we used to sing when I was a boy was absolutely true, but it isn't! It ran after this fashion:

"What means this eager, anxious throng,
Which moves with busy haste along,
These wondrous gatherings day by day?
What means this strange commotion, pray?
In accents hushed, the throngs reply:
'Jesus of Nazareth passeth by.'"

Oh, if that were but true! If only the crowd were interested in Christ as Christ is interested in them, what marvelous things we should see, and what a wonderful work He would accomplish!

Another verse ran after this manner:—

“Jesus! ‘tis He who once below
Man’s pathway trod, ‘mid pain and woe;
And burdened ones, where’er He came,
Bro’t out their sick, and deaf, and lame,
The blind rejoiced to hear the cry:
‘Jesus of Nazareth passeth by!’”

Oh, if that were but true! If that were but true, the sick would be healed, the deaf would hear, the lame would walk, the blind would see!

The last verses of the above hymn should make their appeal to those of us who know Him and love Him:

“Again He comes! from place to place
His holy footprints we can trace.
He pauseth at our threshold—nay,
He enters — condescends to stay.
Shall we not gladly raise the cry—
‘Jesus of Nazareth passeth by’?”

“Ho! all ye heavy-laden, come!
Here’s pardon, comfort, rest, and home,
Ye wanderers from a Father’s face,
Return, accept His proffered grace,
Ye tempted ones, there’s refuge nigh,
‘Jesus of Nazareth passeth by.’”

“But if you still this call refuse,
And all His wondrous love abuse,
Soon will He sadly from you turn,
Your bitter prayer for pardon spurn.
‘Too late! too late!’ will be the cry—
‘Jesus of Nazareth has passed by!’”

But I must not close till I have talked on this last sentence—

III. THE IMMEDIATE HEALING

“Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked: and on the same day was the sabbath” (vss. 8-9).

Some further reflections, then:

One word from Christ is better than all healing waters.

Doubtless this was a superstition, that an angel entered into these waters once a year. You know, perhaps, that some of the versions do not have this statement about the angel entering into these waters. It is doubtful if there are any waters on the earth that have such medicinal properties that a single dip would end disease; but there are a great many ministers who are preaching that ordinary water will suffice for the washing away of sins, even though it be but a drop or two of the same, provided it is applied with the formula— **“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”**

“Baptismal regeneration” has long been the delusion of many—the false gospel of not a few. There is no power in water to save; *there is power in the blood and in the blood alone.*

Baptism has its merit. It is an act of obedience to a plain command, and when it is properly performed it is a symbol of death to sin, burial with Christ, and resurrection to walk in newness of life with Him (Romans 6:4-6); but it is not a saving ordinance.

It is not written, “He that is baptized shall be saved,” but it is asserted, **“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.”**

Faith is the Victory.

Take Christ at His Word—**“Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out,”** and the Word will prove to be life.

There are millions, today, who will testify that when they trusted the Word of Christ they were surely and suddenly saved. That is why Paul enjoined Timothy to **“Preach the Word”**; that is why it is written: **“To you is the Word of salvation sent”**; that is why Paul said: **“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one who believeth.”**

One Word from Him and waiting was at an end.

Thirty and eight years the lame man had lain in this case. How long a time! If there is any case of sickness that stirs my soul to the depths of sorrow it is the sight of one afflicted with what is supposed to be an incurable disease; one who has lain on his bed year after year; one whose weariness and waiting have produced hopelessness.

I used to go and visit Mrs. Dr. Stone at Bloomington, Ill, and see her sit day after day in her wheelchair, the bones in her body petrifying. For a quarter of a century she sat and suffered before the end came.

How pathetic, how apparently hopeless!

But this man for more than a third of a century had been in like case, and yet one word from Christ—and the waiting was at an end!

Miss Hollister, of Minneapolis, for seven years lay on a couch on the fifth floor in Syndicate Arcade, her right lower limb shriveled and drawn; and yet one day, as she and others prayed, Jesus of Nazareth, the Physician of all physicians, passed that way and she heard Him say: “I will; be thou whole.” Instantly that weariness, that waiting, that affliction was at an end!

From that moment she walked these streets on two good feet, entered this house of prayer scores and scores of times, bore her testimony in our prayer-meetings again and again, as to how, by one touch, one speech from the Master’s lips, her weariness and waiting were at an end!

It can be so with your soul as surely as it was with her body.

If you are stricken with sin, and would be saved, “**Jesus of Nazareth passeth by.**”

You may be as impotent to help yourself as the men of that day were impotent to create for themselves good eyes, but you can do what they did, or what the Syrophenician woman did—you can cry, “**Lord, help!**” and He will listen and do for you what He did for this man at Bethesda’s pool.

He changed the ceremonial Sabbath into a sabbath of His soul.

How significant that sentence—“**And on the same day-was the sabbath**”! (vs. 9).

The Sabbath—what day is that? That is the day of rest! Would you rest in the Lord today?

Would you experience His peace, “**the peace that passeth all understanding**”? You may, if you will!

The Sabbath—it was a day, also, of rejoicing—a day when the Atonement was completed by the resurrection of Him who had stood in our stead and “**bore our sins in His own body on the tree**”; the day in which the heart of Mary Magdalene and her friend who came early in the morning to the tomb got an uplift that was heaven on earth, and sent them back the happiest women that lived!

And this Sunday morning, called by the Christian Church a Sabbath, and kept ceremonially as such, could, and will become a blessed sabbath to your soul, if you will let Jesus speak the word of healing, proclaim an everlasting pardon for you.

You can go out today, and walk “**to and fro in the earth**” with a lighter step than you have known in a lifetime, with a heart happier than has ever before been found beating in your breast, and with a personal and perpetual song of rejoicing upon your lips!

“O day of rest and gladness,
O day of joy and light, O balm of care and sadness,
Most beautiful, most bright; On thee, the high and lowly,
Bending before the throne, Sing Holy, Holy, Holy,
To the Great Three in One!”

~ end of sermon 2 ~

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