

Healing of Paraplegic

Philip Yancy, one of the most popular and acclaimed Christian writers of our day tells a story in his book, *Finding God in Unexpected Places* of a visit he had to a prison in Chile.

The prison was overcrowded and there was a prison fellowship of over 150 prisoners – yes, God is moving in the prisons of South America, unexpected places which are full of his blessings.

Yancy heard about a man call Pascal who was imprisoned for participating in a student strike in Madagascar. Pascal had strong atheistic views and he was incarcerated into a prison designed for 800 men but which held three times that number. They sat elbow to elbow on the floor boards, most of them dressed in rags and covered in lice.

Pascal had only one book in his possession and that was a Bible handed to him from his family. Despite his atheism, he read it daily, no doubt to keep his mind focussed and alert.

After three months, despite his atheistic views, he started to pray. His scientific knowledge was of no help to him in prison. God met him in the midst of this Hell on Earth and he became a believer in Jesus.

He heard Jesus telling him to stand up, pick up his mat and walk and this is what happened, he was released from prison after three months, someone in authority had a change of heart and here is the amazing thing: Pascal keeps going back into these smelly prisons to preach and to distribute Bibles and to share his testimony of how God met him in an unexpected place.

On a Friday, he brings in homemade soup, as he saw the prisoners were suffering from malnutrition, and his changed life speaks to the prisoners.

Pascal shows the difference that Jesus makes to one life. You'd have thought that Pascal, when released from prison would have stayed away and erased it from his mind, but quite the opposite, he stands up, lifts his mat and walks back to the prison to speak of how God's love can change lives even in a stinking crowded room.

We know that waiting time in A&E can be lengthy, but nothing like the length of time our main character in our gospel reading, had to wait to see a consultant.

38 years he had been waiting for a cure.

Every day turning up at the pool of Bethesda to lie on his mat; I trust that he had good friends that took him in the morning and collected him in the evening or perhaps he had crutches.

38 years! A paraplegic – who had lost the ability to walk – whether this was an accident or an illness we don't know, but what we do know is that he was in a desperate state.

Jesus visited Jerusalem on one of their holy days – one of their festivals and where did he choose to spend it?

The pool of Bethesda which resembled a first century A&E ward. The Pool of Bethesda (Aramaic for “House of Mercy”) was a spring-fed pool just north of the temple in Jerusalem.

We are told that “Crowds of sick people, blind, lame and paralysed lay in the porches”.

They all came hoping for a miracle, invalids were there, waiting for the angel to do his magical work. Every time the water bubbled a person had the chance of healing, so they thought, if they could reach the pool first!

Jesus entered into this crazy situation, just like Pascal visiting the overcrowded prison in Madagascar, and I believe Jesus looked for the worst possible case.

He knew that he was entering a sick ward full of needy people. Everyone in the five covered porches was crying out for help. Jesus chose someone who was at the end of the queue – someone who had been waiting the longest – someone who kept coming, hoping for a miracle.

Jesus saw and knew the paraplegic had been ill for a long time and he asked him a question – “Would you like to get well?”

Was Jesus wanting to know the purpose of this man coming every day – did this man really want to get well? It's a faith question, God can work in our lives, only if we really want it.

Jesus noticed that this man was unable to get better. God notices the widow and the orphan and those who are discarded by the world.

Jesus was not interested in their superstition about the bubbling of the water bringing healing, rather he had the man's attention and he called the man to stand up, pick up his mat and walk!

Three simply and precise commands. Three words that would change his life.

Stand! Lift! Walk.

Here we see the call of God on this person's life.

The Apostle encourages his church in Ephesus in the midst of trial and testing to “Stand firm, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, Ephesians 6 v14

Jesus called this man out of his challenges and his dismal life into a new life; he called him to stand, and live a life lived in its fullness again; Jesus said “I have come to give life and life in its fullness “and this man is a case in point.

It's worth noting that so far in our journey through John's gospel, Jesus has reached out to individuals; Nicodemus, the Jewish lawyer comes to Jesus in the darkness of night and comes searching as a lonely and lost soul, and Jesus calls him to have a completely new spiritual life; to be born again.

The Samaritan woman comes to Jesus in the heat of the Jewish sunshine and Jesus exposes her life and cleanses her and fills her with living water.

The royal official comes and falls before Jesus because his son is dying and Jesus heals his son and now, we have a man who was a paraplegic for 38 years and he is in a hopeless condition and Jesus tells this paraplegic to stand up, and all four people, different walks of life, all come to faith in Christ. They are healed spiritually, physically and socially.

Jesus calls them all to stand, Nicodemus is touched by the grace of Jesus and he stands with Jesus at the cross and resurrection.

The Samaritan woman brings her community to meet Jesus and they stand together and recognise Jesus to be the Saviour of the World.

The royal official goes home, finds his son healed, and his whole household stands together in faith, and today we see that this paraplegic of 38 years stands and bears witness to Jesus before his Jewish leaders.

Jesus calls us also to stand up and be counted, in the words of the opening hymn, “Stand up and bless the Lord”.

What type of things should we stand for?

Stand up for what we know to be true, and good, and right, even when it's hard to do that and to know that God is with us.

A constant theme in the Old Testament is Stand Up for Justice

Stand up for the vulnerable

Stand up for the weak

Stand up for the persecuted

Stand up for Christ and his mission and his church.

Today we need Christians to hear again Jesus' call to stand up and be counted.

Yesterday, we had Open Doors Day in the Church, and as I wandered around looking at the stained-glass windows, and reading about their history. I was drawn again to the Thomas Muir window, and to think about his incredible short life; as a young man in this church he became an elder, and he made a stand against the landowners, who were selecting their own ministers and Thomas believed in the process of democracy, and that the people of the congregation should choose their minister, and so he made a stand and his stand took him to a trial in Edinburgh, and he was charged and sent to Botany Bay, where he preached the gospel each Sunday and eventually made his escape, and he took with him two items from Botany Bay – a compass and a Bible – two items which would give him a direction in life – the compass would inform him of his geographical position and direction and the Bible of course would guide him spiritually.

What two items would you have taken, if you had to leave everything behind and make a new life.

Making a stand can be costly as it was for Thomas Muir.

This man trusted Jesus and so he stood up. He stood up because Jesus called him to stand.

He stood up because Jesus stood up with him. When Jesus said to the man stand up, it was as though he was saying to him, “OK, we can do this together...Bend your will to it and you and I will do this together.”

This is a beautiful moment in this gospel story because God invites us to also act in faith. He commands, but we must do our part and stand up. This is a real test for this man's faith. Jesus asks him, *do you want to get well?* and now he has to prove it.

But when you have the gracious words of Jesus speak into your heart and his presence is beside you, and his gaze is upon you, you will stand, you will rise, and make that big effort.

Willie Barclay writes, “The power of God never dispenses with human effort. Nothing is truer than we must realise our own helplessness; but in a very real sense it is true that miracles happen when our will and God's power co-operate to make them possible.”

Stand up, was Jesus' message to this man who had not stood for 38 years. This was his day of healing; this was his day of transformation.

Now physical healing does not come to everyone, healing comes in different ways.

The story of Joni Earekson Tada is beautiful.

She said, “I would rather be in this chair knowing Jesus, than to stand on my feet without Him.”

Those were her words spoken by international disabilities advocate Joni Erickson Tada, minutes before she addressed a conference audience on the topic of suffering and the sanctity of life.

She knows what it is to be in a dark place, where life doesn't feel worth living.

And she knows what it is to be healed—but not in the way the world deems most important.

Joni shared her story often at Billy Graham Crusades around the world.

Her book, *Beside Bethesda* is a story of Joni's journey with God during the season of her life when she was first injured as a result of a diving accident. At the age of 17 she unknowingly dived into some shallow water and immediately became a quadriplegic.

She wrote, “During those early days in the hospital, I imagined myself in John chapter five by the Pool of Bethesda along with the disabled and diseased people looking to be healed. I would beg God to heal me, as he did the man who lay on a straw mat, paralyzed for 38 years: ‘God, please heal me like you healed him.’”

Yet, two years later when she was released from the hospital, she didn’t get the physical healing that consumed her thoughts and her prayers.

“I suffered a deep disappointment with God,” she remembered.

“But in her book, *Beside Bethesda*, she speaks of how she found a deeper healing from John chapter five. She speaks of her spiritual healing, that God brought to her. It is because of this healing that she got to a point to where she can earnestly say, ‘I would rather be in this chair knowing Jesus than to stand on my feet without Him.’

And it was through this journey of healing that she made the rich, wonderful discovery that there are more important things than walking.

She stood spiritually, she is a giant in the Christian faith.

Jesus also called this man to pick up his mat. To pick up the thing that had been his support and comfort through the years. To pick up his mat is symbolic of his past life. By picking this up, and carrying it, he is demonstrating to the people in the porches that he had been healed and has no longer need for the mat.

He is in control of his life or rather God is now in control. He has no need for his mat or past life.

The mat had been his comfort for 38 years, now he no longer needs this crutch; he has defeated it through Jesus, and as he carries it through the town on that Sabbath morning, people will see that he has changed, people will make their assessment of him – some will judge – some will condemn – some will persecute – some will scoff – and that’s what happened to him. The very people who should have supported and encouraged him were the ones who attacked him.

Almost immediately, he runs into opposition. He had been healed from 38 years of being dependent on his stinky mat – dependent upon a life style

that was hellish. You would think that everyone would have been happy for him. But as he carried his mat through the streets the Pharisees were there to pick holes in his healing. They reminded him that it was sinful to carry his mat on the Sabbath, that he was breaking Jewish laws. The orthodox Jews had defined what it meant to work on a Sabbath and carrying your mat was in the eyes of Jews a sign of work.

So, in this story, we can see Jesus teaches that human need must always be helped; that there is no greater task than to relieve someone's pain and distress. Whereas the Pharisees, the religious people of their day, were so caught up in their tradition and man-made laws that they did not see the needs of the man.

He stood up, he picked up and then Jesus told him to walk.

Here is the test, can he do it?

This is one of the most moving events in the gospels – a quadriplegic man who had lain on his mat for 38 years, can now stand up, pick up his mat and walk forward.

We are told that instantly the man was healed. Through this third “sign” in John's gospel, Jesus shows He is the ultimate Healer, not just of physical illness but of our hearts.

After the healing, “Jesus found [the man] in the temple, and said to him, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’” John 5:14.

Jesus revealed that the man's physical healing was secondary to his need to be healed spiritually. Although the passage does not reveal the man's conversion, it does teach that Jesus sees not only our physical issues but our hearts as well. Go and sin no more. He is the only one who can provide the spiritual healing we need. While being physically ill for thirty-eight years is difficult, an eternity without God is even worse.

Jesus' command, “Take up your bed and walk,” and its immediate result reveal that He is greater than any superstition, folklore, or man-made rule.

Faith in anything other than Jesus is misplaced and leaves us wanting. Yet Jesus can forgive anyone who will turn to Him for salvation—that is the ultimate healing we all need.

Jesus met with Zachaeus the tax collector, and he called him from the sycamore tree, and Jesus invited himself into Zachaeus's home for dinner. After dinner, we are told that this short man stood up, and said that he was giving half his wealth to the poor, and he was paying back four times those he had cheated. He stood up...for the first time in his life, he stood up to the truth. He put on the belt of truth and he stood up and put his faith to work, giving away all his mis-earned money.

In the words of Jesus, *Stand, Lift and Walk*. Is this a word for someone today? I believe that it is a message for everyone, and every day of our lives, should be an opportunity that we come to God, and hear him say, *Stand up for me, Lift up your problems and issues and go forward walking in my footsteps* or in the words of Jesus, *lift up your cross and follow after me*.