

Sunday 15th February 2015 AM Hope's progress when you've had it – John 5v1-15

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Purpose: To see three types of hope: DISAPPOINTED, DENIED and DELIVERED and to consider our place in this sequence.

INTRODUCTION

This weekend for young people up and down the land (Valentine's Day) (and for some not so young) has seen their hopes either FOUNDED or DASHED.

Now of course if someone was simply overlooked this year in the romance stakes then it is not the end of the world because it is just a case of HOPE DEFERRED, however it is much worse if your hope hardens and eventually becomes HOPE DISAPPOINTED.

Today our story takes us into the arena of HOPE and particularly to where a man has HOPE DISAPPOINTED.

Equal and opposite errors

However before we get into the encounter in John 5 let me give you a couple of preliminaries.

When it comes to reading the gospel stories (and this could apply really to pretty well any passage of Scripture) – there are a couple of equal and opposite errors that we can quite easily fall into:

- **ONE** – is to read **TOO MUCH INTO** a passage OR section
- **THE OTHER** – is to read **TOO LITTLE OUT**

John 5 – a case in point

This passage that we have before us in John 5, of the long-term invalid, IS ONE SUCH PASSAGE.

1. Reading too much INTO it

Q. How, you might ask, could we end up reading way too much INTO this passage?

Well by turning it from a simple story into more of an ALLEGORY where individual details are taken to be references to something else, someone else or to some concept or other.

And it is not as hard to do as that definition might sound – **consider the following allegorical possibilities:**

- **THE MAN** – could stand for “**The people of Israel**”
- **THE 5 COVERED COLONNADES** – could stand for **the 5 books of the Law of Moses** – because the Law could show us our weakness but could never fix it. The Law, like these colonnades could provide shelter, but could never extend a helping hand to heal the broken soul.
- **THE 38 YEARS** – could become a reference for **the 38 years of wandering in the desert** that the Israelites experienced before they finally entered the Promised Land.

So that's a bad case of taking a plain factual account and turning it into a different form of writing – and thus reading much too much into it.

2. Reading too little OUT OF it

Ok you say – but:

Q. How might we do the reverse?

Q. How might we not read enough OUT OF this passage?

Well one possible way this can happen is just because **we don't take time to look around us.**

And probably the most obvious thing to notice is any possible overlaps with the previous OR later miracles that Jesus performs and which John has selected to be included in his gospel.

Let me sketch in for you some obvious **CONNECTIONS** with the passage that we did last week from the end of John 4 where the civil servant's son get brought back from the brink of death:

- **IN BOTH** – they are **healings**
- **IN BOTH** – they are **serious cases**
- **IN BOTH** – the healings are **miraculous** and show something of the **amazing & divine power of Jesus**

In terms of some obvious (and very possibly intended) **CONTRASTS**:

- **IN ONE** – we have a **young lad** being brought back to life from the brink of death
IN THE OTHER – we have someone who must, at a very minimum be **38 years old** BUT probably quite a bit older
- **IN ONE** – we have someone healed of an **ACUTE illness**
IN THE OTHER – we have someone suffering instead from a **CHRONIC illness**
(if you're not sure the difference – what I mean is that one is essentially **SHORT TERM**, but the other is **LONG RUNNING**)
- **IN ONE** – the illness is **LIFE-THREATENING**
IN THE OTHER – the condition is merely **LIFE-CURTAILING**
- **IN ONE** – we have a father **CLINGING ON TO HOPE**
IN THE OTHER – we have a man who is, very probably, **BEYOND THE POINT OF HOPE**
- **IN ONE** – what we have is best described as **ILLNESS**
IN THE OTHER – we are better talking about **INVALIDITY**

Now just for completeness, it is worth just mentioning the miracle in John 9. The story of another long-term cripple who gets healed. In that case it is one who is blind from birth and for whom we learn that his condition was not related to his sin or the sin of his parents. Whereas in this case, again a long-term cripple, but here there is suggestion that there may be a sin that has been a contributory factor.

The passage itself – a special place

As we get into the passage itself - I think one of the things that stands out very obviously, is that this place, where the healing takes place, is a very special one.

One thing that is very clear is that this was a popular spot. Verse 3 “Here a great number of disabled people used to lie”

And **the reason they came** was:

- **NOT SIMPLY** that it was covered and gave them protection from the sun or from bad weather
- **NOR** that it boasted a nice pool in which they could bathe and refresh themselves

The point was that here at this place **THINGS HAPPENED**. People found physical healing.

Did you notice that there is ***no* Verse 4** in your NIV bible?

(Some bible versions do include the extra bit in **Verse 3** and then a **Verse 4**). The NIV has it as a footnote and it reads:

(Verse 3b-4)“ the blind, the lame, the *paralyzed*—and they waited for the moving of the waters. ⁴ From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first one into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had.”

This was probably not in the original since none of the oldest and best manuscripts have this, but it most likely crept into later versions because scribes inserted annotations to insert the historical background to things.

Q. Was it really the miraculous workings of an angel? Well, we don't really know is the short answer and it probably isn't worth looking spending any time on it.

Bethesda

What is, however, worth noting is its name, which we find in **Verse 2** – **BETHESDA** – which comes from the Hebrew meaning either **“House or place of mercy”** OR **“Place of outpouring”** – both pretty fitting names.

Our structure

Well, I want to now look at our passage under three headings and **WHAT UNITES THEM** is **THE THEME OF HOPE** which appears to run all the way through.

#1 then, and what I'm going to call:

1. “HOPE DISAPPOINTED” (Verses 1-9a)

Imagine it!

Q. I wonder if you can imagine what 38 years is like?

- it's about **half of a lifetime!**
- it's that point at which you might be **receiving your career “long service award”**
- it's not too far away from **the million hours mark from when you were born!!**

And Jesus comes up to this chappie and asks the question: So Q. **“Do you want to get well?”**

You would certainly think that that was a complete “no brainer”.

Now:

- **we don't know** how many years this man has been coming here to the pool of Bethesda,
- but **what we do know** is that he has been frustrated on many, probably countless occasions.

A free-for-all – survival of the fittest

Just try and think, for a moment, what this place was like:

- it's crammed full of people who, in so many ways, were: **“bottom of the barrel people”, “no-hopers”**

- these are people who have perhaps been **used to begging all of their lives** (given that there wasn't any social security provision in those days)
- and DISAPPOINTMENT breeds DISCONTENT
AND DISCONTENT fuels DISILLUSIONMENT
AND DISILLUSIONMENT leads inevitably to a place of DESPERATION and ultimately HOPELESSNESS

Now beyond this, see if you can picture what might happen **when the water bubbles up & get stirred:**

(SPOONS GAME) – the other night we were teaching our French students a simple game that we call SPOONS – and in this game you are seated on the floor around a table with a few spoons in the middle and the idea is that as soon as someone gets a matching set of cards, THEN they have to quietly take a spoon and the last person to try and get a spoon DOESN'T GET ONE and they are OUT.

As you can probably imagine, this game is really just a good excuse for a bit of a mad scrum as everybody suddenly realises that someone's finished and tries to grab a spoon!!

- so for hour after hour people are sitting comfortably chatting and there's just a gentle hubbub and **then all of a sudden SOMEONE IS MAKING A BEE-LINE** to the pool's edge

THIS IS NOW: The law of the jungle where **"he who can shimmy the fastest wins"** –

OR, if you want to put that in a more ironic form – it's a case of **"The survival of the FITTEST!!"**

This place, as you might be able to sense, is not necessarily a place where HOPE LIVES ON – it could just as easily be a place:

- where HOPE, BY DEGREES, IS WASHED SLOWLY AWAY
- where HOPE DIES THAT DEATH OF A THOUSAND CUTS

Something we see about Jesus – His individual interest

This passage shows us something very important about Jesus that we ought not to pass over.

Verse 6 says: "When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?"

I don't know about you but my strong feeling is that Jesus didn't come into that JERUSALEM SPA and say to himself: "Eenie meanie miney mo!". The way I read it is that he came in and seeing "a great many disabled people" (as Verse 3 tells us) – does 2 things:

- **FIRST – he surveys those that are there** – considering the severity of their situations
- **THEN** – having seen a man who looks in a pretty bad way, (whether because of his physical deformities OR whether because of his demeanor – we don't know) **he seeks to find out about him.**

When Verse 6 says "he learned that he had been in that condition a long time", I take that to mean that **he asked around.**

It is not the only time we see Jesus asking about the people he is going to heal.

Take the occasion in Mark 9 of the demon possessed boy, before he casts out the demon, he asks the father of the boy: (Mark 9 verse 21) "How long has he been like this?"

You might think that I am too small, too insignificant for Jesus, or for God to pay any individual attention to – but this passage, I think, needs to put paid to that notion.

This truth should really blow you away, to be honest.

Just as the writer of Psalm 8 says:

Psalm 8 Verses 3-4 "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"

Q. Tell me – do you really believe that Jesus sees you & even enquires about you?

The responses that go on

Let's look at the responses that go on now – having been asked if he wants to get well – the invalid responds by telling Jesus that he is in the ULTIMATE CATCH 22 situation:

- He wants to be healed, the power is apparently there for this to happen
- YET, at the very same time, he is never going to be the first one there – he will always be STYMIED by another!

Jesus – just a fit pair of legs

Just as with our CIVIL SERVANT last week, he makes assumptions about Jesus – and here it is that Jesus will need to stay around and become his attendant, so that when the water next bubble up, then Jesus can then be a fit pair of legs for him.

It is, I think, the easiest thing in the world to see Jesus as something that he is not.

Perhaps you also see Jesus as a bit of an errand boy waiting around for those GAPS IN YOUR LIFE – when you actually can't do something yourself.

He is a kind of, what they call: "GOD OF THE GAPS".

JESUS OF THE GAPS.

Let me try and persuade you that Jesus is too big to be squeezed into any of your GAPS!!

Jesus is DOUBLY MERCIFUL

Jesus response to the man, is DOUBLY MERCIFUL.

- not only does he overlook the man's tendency to fit Jesus into a particular mould
- he also goes on to heal the man with a striking word of command

Verse 8 "...Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."

(Verse 9) "At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked."

It is about the equivalent of: "Get up! What are you waiting for!"

As ever, I believe that Jesus can see that the man is not totally devoid of faith – and the man I believe responds with the IMPERFECT YET ALL IMPORTANT SEED OF FAITH – and as he starts to obey Jesus, his legs immediately become strong.

Just make a start

If you think – well I don't have all my questions answered yet, I don't full understand everything – well take your cue from this man – his knowledge was a very long way from perfect, but TWO THINGS HE KNEW:

- ONE – he was in a place of MISERY, he was in need of SERIOUS HELP
- TWO – he had a mustard seed of FAITH to take action at the sound of Jesus' words (regardless of how much or how little he could figure it out)

So we have FIRST MET A MAN WITH what would be fair to describe as a “**HOPE DISAPPOINTED**” – I want to go onto the second set of people who I think display what could best be described as a #2

2. “HOPE DENIED” (Verses 9b-13)

Now the passage turns mid-way through Verse 9 where we learn a small detail that is actually a very big deal:

Verse 9b “The day on which this took place was a Sabbath.”

It is not the only small detail that seems to be deliberately put here for us to observe.

Q. Did you notice that **no less than 5 times** in consecutive verses (starting at Verse 8), we hear about him picking up his mat and walking?

I have to admit that it is a bit strange HOWEVER it does draw your eye and you are meant to see that something so simple and everyday is actually, for these Jews, no longer something simple and everyday.

The 39 Articles

For the Church of England, since the middle of the 1500's (1563 – Elizabeth I), they have had something called the 39 Articles and this document describes all of their doctrine and beliefs.

The Jews had an equivalent of the 39 Articles relating to just one matter of doctrine and that was the Sabbath Day.

And one of those points has relation to what you can and what you cannot carry on the Sabbath Day – and they based their mountain of man-made rules and regulations on verses such as this one in Jeremiah 17:

Jeremiah 17 Verses 20-22 “Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Judah and all people of Judah and everyone living in Jerusalem who come through these gates. This is what the Lord says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers.”

For these people, these leaders of the Jews, they were big on a couple of things:

- they were those who very much **MAJORED on MINORS** and in so doing lost sight of those things truly MAJOR
See how they pounce on this man because he is breaking (not the OT Scripture – that that was concerned not with any burden at all, but with trading & labouring on the Sabbath day) because he is breaking THEIR VERY

EXTENSIVE 39 ARTICLES ON THE SABBATH ALONE!!

Also, at the very same time, they do not notice or make any joyous comment about the fact that this man is finally healed after 38 long long years.

Hear how Jesus sums up this terrible method in [Matthew 23](#) (Verses 23-24):

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. **You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.**”

- a second thing is that they were spending all their time being **POLICEMEN for the LAW** and not **PREACHERS for the GOSPEL**.

Q. What do I mean?

Well simply that their whole concern and pre-occupation was on **POLICING** people’s obedience to a set of **LAWS** (most of which were actually man-made and **NOT** God-commanded).

What they should have been doing was **HOLDING UP HIGH** the great things of God’s **GOOD NEWS** so that people would see it and desire it for themselves.

Whenever we swap **PREACHING** the grace of the **GOSPEL** for **POLICING** the letter of the **LAW** – then we have nothing more than a “**FAKE HOPE**”.

The apostle Paul puts this very succinctly in [Galatians 3](#) – I’ll read the verses because I think they pretty well speak for themselves and make it pretty plain that **LAW-POLICING** with the goal of **LAW-KEEPING** is a totally **VAIN & FAKE HOPE**:

[Galatians 3 Verses 10-14](#) “All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, “The man who does these things will live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.” He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”

So then a man **FIRSTLY** who had “**HOPE DISAPPOINTED**” then the Jews who dealt in “**HOPE DENIED**” now lastly **#3** what I’m going to call:

3. “**HOPE DELIVERED**” (Verses 14-15)

If one of the things that we noted earlier was that Jesus made a lot out of a small person who, because of his very desperate situation, we also now see that he makes, as it were, little of himself.

See how Jesus sought no fanfare and just carefully dissolves out of sight.

As [v13](#) says “The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had **slipped away into the crowd** that was there.”

Now the story could have ended there, but Jesus is not finished with this man.

Q. Why is he not finished? After all the man is now cured and physically whole again.

Jesus is not finished simply because he did ***not*** come to fix up our bodies – but as:

1 Timothy 1 Verse 15 says: "Christ Jesus came into the world to **save sinners...**"

So this is why Jesus having firstly SPOTTED this man amongst the MULTITUDES now SEEKS him out again in the temple.

Q. I wonder what you make of Jesus statement (Verse 14) "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you."?

In that day many people assumed that if you were sick or experiencing trouble in your life (rather like Job in the OT) then it was always because of some sin in your life. Basically divine justice was being served upon you.

However, we know from the story in [John 9](#) of the man born blind that this was *not* necessarily the case.

We also know this from the [Luke 13](#), and the discussion of a couple of recent tragedies, that the unfortunate people that had been in the wrong place at the wrong time were not there because they were worse sinners than anybody else.

It appears that in the case of this man, and the plain way in which Jesus speaks that the man might well have sinned in some grievous manner and that God was punishing him in order to bring him slowly to his senses.

Does God do that – well yes he does and we can find some places where people even have their lives taken from them because they chose to make a bit of a mockery of the Lord's Table (the symbol of Jesus' body and blood).

Q. What is the "something worse" that might happen to this man if he doesn't repent of his sin?

Well that would most likely point:

- *not* to a mere LIFE-SPAN OF SICKNESS
- *but* to an ETERNAL-LIFE OF SEPARATION & JUDGMENT

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude and to do so by asking a final question – a very simple one: Q. Does this man get saved?

- He is clearly WHOLE IN BODY *BUT*Q. Is he now WHOLE IN SOUL?

I think there are A COUPLE OF CLUES:

- **CLUE #1** – is the GENERAL PATTERN that we see emerging in John's gospel:

One encounter with Jesus after another – the common theme of the gospel (as John 20 specifically tells us) being that of people coming to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

And each time we see people crossing over from:

- from DARKNESS to LIGHT
- from UNBELIEF to FAITH
- from SIN to REPENTANCE

And so we have more reason than not to see this man as being a part of that sequence of COMING TO FAITH examples.

- **CLUE #2** – is in the FINAL VERSE (Verse 15) where we read "The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well."

Q. What is the clue? Well he could easily have said to the Jews: "It was Jesus who told me to carry my mat" and thereby to put the blame for the Sabbath violation firmly into Jesus' court. But instead, he puts the focus back

where it belongs and that is upon his healing.

The fact is that the original more literally says: "it was Jesus who **MADE HIM WHOLE.**" (Verse 15)

So three places or stages of HOPE, only one is worthy, only one is worthwhile.

Q. Where are you on this scale?

A "fading hope" --- A "futile hope" --- A "fruitful hope"

Let's pray ... AMEN