

CHAPTER FIVE

THE TRUE HEALER

*"I lay there in the dark
And I close my eyes
You saved me the day
You came alive"*

-The Foo Fighters, "Come Alive:

The modern world is something of a paradox. It's an age where there's a computer in every pocket, yet a hole in our hearts as vast as the ocean. Centuries ago, the great prophets of our secular age trumpeted the arrival of a great age of reason, one where the superstitions of the past would be replaced with a utopian vision of scientific progress. Yet for all our evolutionary optimism, the modern world has failed to make good on these promises. Scott Russell Sanders, an American novelist, recounts the kinds of questions he hears from young adults:

"Suppose your daughter is engaged to be married and she asks whether you think she ought to have children, given the sorry state of the world. Suppose your son is starting college and he asks what you think he should study, or why he should study at all, when the future looks so bleak. Or suppose you are a teacher and one student after another comes to ask you how to deal with despair. What would you tell them?"

Sanders notes that these questions aren't coming from a vacuum, but from a deep abiding concern over the way things should be:

The young people who put their disturbing questions to me have had an ecological education, and a political one as well. They know we are in trouble. Everywhere they look they see ruined landscapes and ravaged communities and broken people. So they are asking me if I believe we have the resources for healing the wounds, for mending the breaks. They are asking me if I live in hope."¹

Sadly, the modern world is facing something of a hope deficit. A pair of economists have noted the sharp rise in the so-called "deaths of despair" — suicide, drug overdose, and diseases born from addiction. The COVID pandemic only magnified our collective loneliness and grief. As one columnist put it, the protocol of Clorox wipes and inadequate masks is nothing compared with the daily task of disinfecting one's own mind."²

¹ Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope*. (Boston: Beacon, 1998), 1-2.

² Andrew Solomon, "When the Pandemic Leaves Us Alone, Anxious, and Depressed," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-depression-anxiety.html>

On the surface, “living in hope” might seem to be a naïve sort of denial of the brute realities we face. But for Christianity, hope is something altogether different. As we turn the pages of John’s biography of Jesus, we discover the inbreaking of hope and the promise of true and lasting healing.

INSTITUTIONALIZED

In John’s gospel, we find Jesus performing back-to-back healings. First, he heals a nobleman’s son in Cana (John 4:46-54). Then, he attends an unnamed feast in Jerusalem.

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool called Bethzatha in Aramaic, which has five covered walkways. A great number of sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed people were lying in these walkways. Now a man was there who had been disabled for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and when he realized that the man had been disabled a long time already, he said to him, "Do you want to become well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up. While I am trying to get into the water, someone else goes down there before me." (John 5:2-7)

Disability in the first-century world would have been socially and economically debilitating. There was no real way to earn a living, and so this man would have been forced to rely on family or charity for everything. Food. Hygiene. So you can imagine the desperation that would drive him to this sort of folk medicine. Apparently, the people gathered around the pool believed that once each year, an angel would come to stir the waters. The first person in the pool would be healed of his or her infirmity. There’s no record of this legend in any other text, nor is there any evidence that it actually worked.

On the surface, Jesus’ question may seem obvious: “Do you want to become well?” But it’s almost certainly a test of the man’s resolve. The man can only answer that he has no helpers, only competitors. And so for nearly four decades, the man lay there in the shadow of desperation, with withered legs and withered hopes and a sadness so deep no tears could break its surface.

The now-classic film *The Shawshank Redemption* tells the story of Andy Dufresne, a man imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit. During his time in Shawshank, he befriends a group of inmates all waiting for their chance at parole and a taste of the outside world. But for one older inmate, Brooks, the outside world is too much to take in after so many years behind bars. Not long after his release, he hangs himself, sending a farewell letter to the only “family” he still knows: the gang from Shawshank prison. “These walls are funny,” Andy’s friend Red remarks after reading the letter. “First you hate ‘em, then you get used to ‘em. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them. That’s institutionalized.”

See, it’s easy for you and I to become “institutionalized.” Like the man by the pool, we’ve defined ourselves by the worst-case scenario. There’s a library of stories packed into single words. Single. Infertility. Divorce. Cancer. Depression. Alone. These words haunt us. Taunt us. Betray our confidence that the world could ever be good to us. That’s “institutionalized.”

Jesus' question cleverly defines the true shape of the man's sickness. It wasn't just his legs that had withered away. It was his hopes. His dreams. His confidence in the goodness of God. Jesus' next words pierce the decades of this man's grief:

“Stand up! Pick up your mat and walk.” Immediately the man was healed, and he picked up his mat and started walking. (John 5:8-9)

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, the author tells us that “the hands of the king are healing hands.” From the moment the man rises to his feet, Jesus' power — and divine identity — are on vivid display. As for the man himself, his doubts and despair have been shattered. No longer would his life be defined by disability or disappointment, but the mercies of God that filled his body with new life.

If Jesus embodies this kind of power, if Jesus offers this kind of promise, why would I pursue identity elsewhere? Hope replaces fear. Wonder replaces doubt. If suffering and death are going to be reversed—nay, eliminated—then my identity is not found in my flaws, but in the spectacular promise of resurrection. I “get up;” I “walk”—not because of a strength that lies within me, but a strength that is given to me through the miraculous provision of the gospel.

SOMETHING WORSE

Hoping to avoid a scene, Jesus initially ducks away while the crowd undoubtedly marveled at the man's healing. It's not clear how the Jewish leaders caught wind of what just happened, though the fact that Jesus finds him at the temple suggests that he may have gone there for confirmation that he had, in fact, been healed. When the Jewish leaders question the man about what happened, he doesn't even know Jesus' name. Only later does Jesus reconnect with the man at the Temple:

After this Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “Look, you have become well. Don't sin any more, lest anything worse happen to you.” The man went away and informed the Jewish leaders that Jesus was the one who had made him well. (John 5:14-15)

There's something unsettling about this final encounter. Stop sinning? Something worse? Was this some sort of threat? Was Jesus implying that the man's prior sickness was some sort of divine punishment?

To make sense of these questions, we have to understand something about the nature of suffering in general. According to the Christian story, the world was created a state of *shalom* — a state of peace, wholeness, and harmony. But shalom was shattered the day that evil slithered into the garden. Sin, says one modern writer, is the “vandalism of shalom.”³ As a result, creation itself became broken. Eden's curse would manifest itself in a thousand terrible ways, from thorns and thistles to earthquakes and oncology reports. In a very real sense, every instance of human suffering is the result of sin. The pain you feel each and every day is an echo of the curse that came as a result of the fall of mankind.

³ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

That's not to say that there's always a one-to-one correspondence between your suffering and the pain you experience. That is, there's not always a direct reason why you suffer the way you do. Even Jesus will later tell his followers that a blind man's condition isn't the direct result of human sin, but an opportunity for God to reveal his glory (John 9:3).

In fact, all of Jesus' miracles are about something much bigger than any one person. Instead, Jesus' miracles are a small gift of shalom, a chance for Jesus to pull back the curtain and reveal that God has a deeper plan to bring restoration and healing for all of creation.

That's what Jesus' conversation is fundamentally about. Think about it for a second. What if God could give you exactly what you wanted? Would that make you happy? If your greatest problem is loneliness, would a new relationship really make you happy? If your greatest problem was a lack of income, would money really make you happy? So you see what Jesus is saying: *Don't assume that being paralyzed was your greatest problem.* If the problem was only physical, a physical cure would solve everything. But the problem — for him, for you, for me — is more than that. External cures won't help an internal problem. Our problem is spiritual. Our problem is sin. Only the gospel can cure this inner, spiritual sickness. Jesus isn't leaving the man with a threat. He's saying that unless he repents and receives the gospel, he has no hope of experiencing God's shalom blessings.

But this must seem absolutely absurd. Because of *course* the man can't stop sinning. No man can. So what's the solution? On the cross, we see exactly what Jesus meant by "something worse." On the cross we witness the shocking breadth of God's just and righteous anger toward human sin. Our sin demands blood. And on the cross, God offers his own.

The disabled man had done nothing to deserve God's mercy. But that's the electrifying beauty of the gospel. In his novel *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene tells the story of a wayward priest who is brought back to his senses while staying among a community of lepers. There, he realizes the sheer depth of God's incredible mercy:

"It was for this world that Christ had died: the more evil you saw and heard about you, the greater the glory lay around the death; it was too easy to die for what was good or beautiful, for home or children or civilization — it needed a God to die for the half-hearted and the corrupt."

Or, it needed a God to die for the *institutionalized*. It needed a God who would die for people like you and me, people who have sought identity in our circumstances, in our suffering, and our carefully rehearsed victimhood. But Jesus experiences this "something worse" so that you and I can experience something better. Later, he tells the adversarial Jewish leadership that true healing comes from salvation from death and judgment:

"I tell you the solemn truth, the Son can do nothing on his own initiative, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise....For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes... I tell you the solemn truth, a time is coming— and is now here— when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. "Do not be amazed at this, because a time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and will come out— the ones

who have done what is good to the resurrection resulting in life, and the ones who have done what is evil to the resurrection resulting in condemnation. “ (John 5:19-29)

“Get up,” Jesus says. “Walk.” The whole scene hints at a time in the future when all of God’s followers would be granted the power to stand—not just from earthly disease but from death itself.

Few writers have expressed this better than Joni Erickson Tada. After a tragic diving accident, Tada became paralyzed from the shoulders down. For Tada, the promise of future resurrection and shalom are far from academic, but a promise that enlivens each day with hope:

“I still can hardly believe it. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness—powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope this gives someone spinal-cord injured like me? Or someone who is cerebral palsied, brain-injured, or who has multiple sclerosis? Imagine the hope this gives someone who is manic-depressive. No other religion, no other philosophy promises new bodies, hearts, and minds. Only in the Gospel of Christ do hurting people find such incredible hope.”⁴

For the Christian, “hope” isn’t the same thing as optimism. Nor is it a kind of wishful thinking. Instead, it is anchored in the historic reality of Christ’s resurrection. This isn’t the first time that Jesus has alluded to God’s promised future. His first sign at the wedding feast had been a hint of the feast of God’s future kingdom. And the cleansing of the temple hinted at the way the temple itself would be replaced by the resurrected body of Christ. In the same way, the present miracle is a reminder that the resurrection of Jesus would bring life back to the dead, and bring a hope that replaces despair.

GOSPEL HEALING

Unfortunately, in the first century there were those that were more concerned about maintaining order than in celebrating the miracle. For one thing, Jesus was performing a role only the temple was meant to fulfill. Prior to western medicine, the religious community was in charge of public health. Jesus’ healing ministry represented a threat to the very existence of the temple. More to the point, Jesus’ miracle was a violation of the Sabbath tradition. Resting on the Sabbath wasn’t just an option; it was a strict requirement. The whole affair only widened the gap between Jesus and the religious leaders:

Now because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began persecuting him. So he told them, "My Father is working until now, and I too am working." For this reason the Jewish leaders were trying even harder to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was also calling God his own Father, thus making himself equal with God. (John 5:16-18)

The concept of Sabbath rest is anchored in the creation story. There, God creates the heavens and the earth over six days, resting on the seventh. This forms the basis for God’s people resting on the seventh day of each week. But Jewish writers noted that God doesn’t cease from all work on the

⁴ Joni Erickson Tada, *Heaven: Your Real Home*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 53.

Sabbath. People are born. They die. These events testify to a God who continues to work on the Sabbath day — even if his people do not. For Jesus to be working on the Sabbath is yet another declaration of his equality with God, a fact that he underscores by calling himself God’s son.

The modern temptation, of course, is to dismiss Jesus as simply a misunderstood historical figure: a spiritual visionary or social justice worker. But that simply doesn’t account for the extraordinary strangeness of Jesus’ story. Because he’s constantly going around making these sort of elaborate statements about his equality with God. The rock musician Bono points out that if Jesus wasn’t everything he says he is, then we have no basis for trusting him simply for his ethical teachings:

“I think it’s the defining question for a Christian: who was Christ?...And I don’t think you’re let off easily by saying, ‘A great thinker,’ or ‘A great philosopher.’ Because actually, [Jesus] went round saying he was the Messiah. That’s why he was crucified. He was crucified because he said he was the Son of God. So, he either, in my view, was the Son of God, or he was...nuts!...Forget rock ‘n roll messianic complexes. This is like, Charlie Manson type of delirium.”⁵

Sure, you might say, but don’t religious people already believe this sort of thing? That may be true, but it’s still completely possible to treat the Bible as if it were little more than a rulebook or a collection of superficial anecdotes. Jesus even acknowledges this when he speaks to the Jewish leaders. He explains that he’s not making this claim on his own, but with the testimony of John the Baptist and even the Bible itself:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39-40)

It’s possible to “master” the art of religious obedience while rejecting Jesus’ absolute claim over our lives. When this happens, we are very much paralyzed indeed. In some ways, the religious community is in even greater danger than the disabled man by the pool. Why? Because in a way, the paralyzed man had an advantage over the religious crowd: *he knew he was sick*. The religious community had spent so much time clothed in their own self-righteousness that they failed to recognize that they were afflicted with a profound spiritual sickness. Through their obedience, they’d become blind to their disbelief.

But religious obedience can never bring about the shalom that Jesus’ healing can. If anything, it only makes it worse. If you want an example of this, just attend a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Leslie Jamison chronicles her own experience with AA in her book *The Recovering*. She notes that the original guidebook for AA was called *The Way Out*. “Out of what?” she asks. “Not just drinking, but the claustrophobic crawl space of the self.” During her own journey, Jamison came to realize that true healing wouldn’t come through her own self-determination. She writes:

“This willpower was a fine-tuned machine, fierce and humming, and it had done plenty of things—gotten me straight A’s, gotten my papers written, gotten me through cross-country

⁵ Quoted from Antonia Blumberg, “U2’s Bono Opens Up About Jesus, God And Praying With His Kids,” *The Huffington Post*, April 11, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bono-jesus_n_5127614

training runs—but when I’d applied it to drinking, the only thing I felt was that I was turning my life into a small, joyless clenched fist.”⁶

Religion works like that. A life of moralistic self-cultivation won’t deliver the healing you hope it will. That applies to religious traditionalists like the Pharisees, as well as the modern social justice movements of today. If you want to find healing — true, lasting healing — then it can only come through the embrace of the Savior who shatters our self-reliance with the good news of his gospel.

LIVING WITH HOPE

What, then, does it mean to “live with hope?” How does Jesus’ suffering and death transform our present? The more we read John’s gospel, the more we begin to realize that “eternal life” means something more than going to heaven when we die. It means experiencing the life-giving presence of God in the here and now.

A German writer was once asked how he might explain something so abstract as “hope” to a young child. The writer happened to have a small toy in his pocket. In Germany, it’s called a *stehaufmännchen*—which literally translates into a “little stand-up man” or “somebody who bounces back.”⁷ The toy had a rounded bottom, so that if you try to knock it over, it simply rises back upright. Hope, the writer says, is standing up. When life or grief knocks us down, hope is standing up. When loneliness and betrayal threaten to overwhelm us, hope is standing up. And when that inner (or outer) voice tells us “you’ll never amount to anything,” hope is standing up. The resurrection of Jesus is a promise not just for the end of history, but that we might find courage in the present to be all that God asks of us.

This is what it means to live with hope. It doesn’t mean denying the brute realities of our present age. It simply means standing up in the face of them, and allowing our identity in Christ to eclipse the way we might otherwise define ourselves by our circumstances. Because — and this is the present point — you are not your despair. You are not your anxiety; you are not your depression. You are not your success, nor are you defined by your failures. You are not defined by your worst moments, but instead are defined by the greatest victory the world has ever known. You are defined — and transformed — by the resurrection power of Jesus Christ, who gives life to the dead and leads us as we make our way down the path until the day when we go limping through the gates of the undying.

Until then, O Lord.

Until then.

⁶ Leslie Jamison, *The Recovering: Intoxication and Its Aftermath* (New York: Little, Brown, 2018), 9.

⁷ Interview with Jurgen Moltmann, from *The Trinity Wall Street*,

<https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/content/j%C3%BCrgen-moltmann-life-power-hope>