

July 9, 2017

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[All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.]

John 5:1-15

Back Together Again

John says that there was a pool in Jerusalem called Bethesda, and word was that the water in this pool had miraculous healing powers. From time to time the water would move in just a certain way. Word was that the first person to enter the water at just the right time would be healed of whatever infirmity ailed them. People came to this pool from miles around, people who were desperate, people who had lost hope. People came to this pool, hoping against hope that they might be there at just the right time and that they might enter the water in just the right way. The water cared nothing about their desperation, but perhaps--just perhaps--the water might dispense the healing that they so desperately longed for.

You remember Humpty Dumpty, right?

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again.

It turns out that there's more to the story that isn't as well-known as this first part. The full story starts out like this:

But soon the King himself heard of Humpty's fate. And he was deeply disturbed. So, setting aside his royal finery, disguised as a common peasant, the King slipped unnoticed through the majestic palace gates and into the rough-and-tumble street life of his kingdom.

The King meandered through the back streets and alleys in search of Humpty. After several days and nights the persistent monarch found him. Humpty's shattered body was scattered over a ten-foot circle amidst the broken glass and flattened beer cans of a back alley.

Though weak from his searching, the King was overjoyed at the sight of Humpty. He ran to his

side and cried, “Humpty! It is I—your King! I have powers greater than those of my horses and men who failed to put you together again. Be at peace. I am here to help!”

“Leave me alone,” Humpty’s mouth retorted. “I’ve gotten used to this new way of life. I kind of like it now.”

“But—“ was all the King could get out before Humpty continued.

“I tell you, I’m fine. I like it here. That trash can over there...the way the sun sparkles on the broken glass. This must be the garden spot of the world!”

The King tried again, “I assure you my kingdom has much more to offer than this back alley—there are green mountains, rolling surfs, exciting cities...”

But Humpty would hear none of it. And the saddened King returned to the palace.

A week later one of Humpty’s eyes rolled skyward only to see once again the concerned face of the King standing over his fractured pieces.

“I’ve come to help,” firmly stated the King.

“Look, leave me alone, will you?” said Humpty. “I’ve just seen my psychiatrist, and he assures me that I’m doing a fine job of coping with my environment as it is. You’re a cop-out. A man has to deal with life as it comes. I’m a realist.”

“But wouldn’t you rather walk?” asked the King.

“Look,” Humpty’s mouth replied, “once I get up and start walking I’ll have to stay up and keep walking. At this point in my life I’m not ready to make a commitment like that. So, if you’ll excuse me—you’re blocking my sun.”

Reluctantly the King turned once again and walked through the streets of his kingdom back to the palace.

["Humpty Dumpty Revisited "by Vic Pentz, from *Stories for the Heart*, compiled by Alice Gray, Multnomah Books, Sisters, OR, 1996]

Have you ever known anyone like Humpty Dumpty, who preferred the familiarity of the brokenness and the mess to the risk of healing and hope and a new future? I have.

Have you ever been someone like Humpty Dumpty, broken and worn down, and putting all your energy into convincing yourself that things really aren't so bad the way they are because change seemed too much effort or somebody else's responsibility, or maybe just impossible and too much to hope for?

You know, it isn't just individuals who can be like Humpty. Families can be like Humpty. Even organizations can be like Humpty.

At first glance, this passage from John chapter 5 seems like a classic Jesus healing story (or hope story). The man was paralyzed. Then he could walk. In between was Jesus.

This is the third of seven signs that John emphasizes in his Gospel account of Jesus' earthly ministry.

The first sign was when Jesus turned water into wine. The celebration was petering out. Then the celebration was better than ever. In between was Jesus. Joy and celebration, it turns out, are not dependent on limited external resources, but on the presence and power of Jesus.

The second sign was when Jesus healed the desperate father's son. The son was sick, lost, in the dark, going the wrong way, on the fast track to an early death. Then the son was alive and well, with a whole new future ahead of him. In between was Jesus. A child's future, it turns out, is not limited by what has happened in the past, but can be changed by the presence and power of Jesus.

The third sign was when Jesus healed the paralyzed man at the pool. The man was stuck, going nowhere with nowhere to go. Then his legs moved, he stood on his own, he picked up his mat, and he walked. In between was Jesus.

Jesus in the New Testament and Job in the Old Testament make very clear that physical disabilities and profound suffering cannot routinely be explained as the consequences of sin. Sometimes babies are born with disabilities. Sometimes the innocent suffer. Other than the general conclusion that we are broken people living in a broken world, no simple conclusion can be drawn that disability or suffering represents just desserts for an individual's (or an individual's parents') sin. Sometimes there is simply no explanation that makes any sense. Sometimes it's nobody's fault.

At the same time, the Bible is clear that choices do indeed have consequences. Bad choices lead to painful consequences. Sin inevitably leads to suffering for someone—maybe the person who committed the sin, maybe somebody else who is caught up in the mess.

In this account of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus suggests that this man's problem was indeed a result of his own sin.

There were a lot of people at the pool that day. Some, like the man in the story, were there because of their own bad choices, choices that had consequences. Some were there because of the bad choices of other people, people who were suffering as the result of violence or abuse or negligence. And some were there because they were broken people in a broken world; they were suffering the consequences of this world's rebellion and darkness, but it was nobody's fault; their infirmity was not linked to any specific choices or actions of themselves or of anyone else.

It seems to be the case, however, that for the person Jesus singles out in this event, his paralysis is connected to his own sin, to his own bad choices. He was not pushed. The ground did not give way beneath him. He jumped into the pit under his own power, or, at the very least, he fell in the pit because he chose not to change direction to avoid it.

Perhaps John chooses to include this account of miraculous healing as the third sign to illustrate that it does not matter if the one who needs Jesus' intervention is innocent (like the sick boy in Capernaum) or not so innocent (like the paralyzed man at the pool). Either way, a person's future is not limited by what has happened in the past, but can be changed by the presence and power of Jesus.

That's an important point. Innocent or guilty, a person's future is not limited by what has happened in the past, but can be changed by the presence and power of Jesus.

Jesus asks this man, “Do you want to get well?” Jesus does not usually ask that question. This time he does.

The King can turn water into wine. The King can heal illness with a word. The King can put Humpty Dumpty back together again. However, if Humpty Dumpty does not want a new future, he will not get one. The King is gentle and non-coercive. He does not take from us what we do not want to let go. He does not give to us what we do not want to receive.

Sometimes people can be just like Humpty Dumpty in the story—comfortable in the brokenness, familiar with the mess, and unwilling to leave the brokenness and the mess behind. Sometimes people get stuck. Sometimes people refuse to be changed, even when not changing leaves them miserable.

Sometimes a different future seems impossible and too much to hope for. Sometimes giving up and giving in seem like the only options. Perhaps there is so much shame that a person can't even imagine a different future. Perhaps there is so much self-condemnation that a person can get stuck in repeated patterns of punishing themselves. Perhaps there is a smoldering rage, which can be like quicksand, causing people to relish their own suffering in a self-destructive attempt to punish somebody else. Sometimes it's easier to remain a victim than to struggle for triumph.

One of the most powerful reasons why some of us prefer the brokenness and the mess to a new future is fear. Misery may be painful, but at least it is familiar. Failure might be unpleasant, but at least it is predictable. If Humpty Dumpty is put back together, then he will have to take responsibility for himself...responsibility for past choices, responsibility for future choices. He will have to leave the alley behind and face an unfamiliar, uncertain, and challenging future. He will have to gain a whole new sense of identity and purpose. These might sound hopeful things. But, when a person is stuck in a pit, it is hard to see very far...and these things can be downright terrifying. Sometimes people are not quite ready to make a commitment like that.

It's understandable. It's also tragic. Because God, who is for us, is so much bigger than anything that is against us. The King is gentle. The King is also powerful. He will take from us what we are willing to let go. He will give us what we are willing to receive.

If the paralyzed man at the well is healed, then he will have to walk. So Jesus asks him, “Do you want to get well?” Later, Jesus reminds him, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” Perhaps Jesus is

warning him of eternal consequences, or perhaps Jesus is simply reminding him that it is his choice—he can keep walking (and face all the challenges that brings) or he can lay back down (and keep waiting for a magic bullet that will make everything better).

One bad decision didn't leave this man helpless and hopeless with legs that did not work. Whatever it was that led to his paralysis, it was a pattern of destructive behavior. Alcohol. Drugs. Pornography. Infidelity. Lying. Cheating. Gossiping. Revenge-seeking. Greed. Slander. Jealousy. Power-grabbing. Gambling. Divisiveness. The list goes on. Returning to that pattern of destructive behavior will have the same results, or worse.

Still, a person's future is not limited by what has happened in the past (or by how many times it has happened). A person's future can be changed by the presence and power of Jesus. Or a family's future. Or an organization's future.

It was over a year before the King ventured to return to Humpty's side.

But, sure enough, one bright morning one of Humpty's ears perked up at the sure, steady strides of the King. This time he was ready. Humpty's eye turned toward the tall figure just as his mouth managed the words, "My King!"

Immediately the King fell to his knees on the glass-covered pavement. His strong, knowing hands gently began to piece together Humpty's fragments. After some time, his work completed, the King rose to full height, pulling up with him the figure of a strong young man. [It took some time--it definitely took some time--and the scars were still visible where the fragments had been brought together, but eventually Humpty was upright again, whole enough to walk and run and dance and live.]

The two walked hand in hand throughout the kingdom. Together they stood atop lush green mountains. They ran together along deserted beaches. They laughed and joked together as they strolled the gleaming cities of the King's domain.

This went on forever. And to the depth, breadth, and height of their friendship there was no end.

Once while walking together down the sidewalk in one of the King's cities, Humpty overheard a remark that made his heart leap with both the joy of his new life and the bitter memory of the back alley. Someone said, "Say, who are those two men?"

Another replied, "Why the one on the left is old Humpty Dumpty. I don't know the one on the right—but they sure look like brothers!"

Did you notice that the man at the well didn't do anything just the right way at just the right time? He didn't even seem to have a very good answer to Jesus question. Jesus met him where he was, in the midst of his desperation. By the presence and power of Jesus, the man who had been going nowhere with nowhere to go began walking into a whole new future.