

## **John 5 and Mental Health**

**John 5:1-15**

“What is life anyway? How would I know, I never had one! All I do is lay around waiting for something to happen, but it never does, at least not for me. I have no friends. . . I guess I never had any friends, at least not since *this* happened to me. I have no money. I can't work. I'm bored. I have no life! And I know in my heart of hearts that nothing will ever change. Then why am I here?”

The crippled man lay on a mat beside a pool in Jerusalem. Rumor had it that every so often an angel came down and disturbed the waters of the pool. The first one into the pool after the water was disturbed would be cured of whatever disease he had. Huge crowds came to be healed, so much so that the man often couldn't even see the pool from where he lay. The least trembling of the water resulted in such a stampede that some had been trampled to death in the process. So for years now he watched the water, waiting for a chance to be healed, but whenever the water was troubled someone less sick than he would be in first. It was hopeless. As the years went by the man's eyes glazed over in despair more and more often. The paralysis of body became a paralysis of mind.

As time dragged on he sometimes allowed himself a few moments of regret. As a young man he had engaged in some very risky behaviors, sin the rabbis called it. They had warned him that sin would lead to sickness and death, and in his case it had, a living death! What was it that had driven him to sin even when he had tried to stop? What kind of emptiness had pushed him to continue in destructive behaviors? Had he known the consequences of his sins would he have

quit in time? Or was he just doomed to this kind of existence? Thirty-eight years of suffering. Was it unfair? Did he really deserve this?

But even worse than the paralysis was the rejection. Because his sickness was the consequence of his sinful actions, most people, especially the religious people, had rejected him. He was abandoned to his fate, all alone with his thoughts, and his thoughts were no fun at all.

Suddenly a kind face bent over him and broke through his glazed stare. He saw in that face the compassion of a man who knew what it was like to suffer rejection. He saw interest and concern. The man said, “Do you want to get well?”

“What kind of question is that?” the crippled man thought, “Do I want to get well? Does a drowning man want air? Does a pig like mud? Does a Pharisee want publicity? Does a Roman want power? Do I want to get well? Who is this guy, anyway?”

### **The House of Mercy**

The Pool of Bethesda has been unearthed by archaeologists in Jerusalem. It lay just north of the temple complex. It was laid out in an uneven rectangle (trapezoid) about 200 feet wide and 300 feet long, 40 feet deep at the deepest point, hewn entirely out of rock. The pool was surrounded by colonnades on all four sides, and was divided into two parts by a colonnade in the center, confirming the Biblical record that the pool had five colonnades (John 5:2). The pool’s structure was Hellenistic (Greek) in origin, and may have been a temple in honor of the Greek god of healing, Asclepias. The pool was fed below ground by an intermittent stream which may explain the troubling of the waters from time to time. As a Hellenistic edifice, it probably

attracted people with a wide mixture beliefs, all hoping to find restoration from the ailments of human life.

The name Bethesda meant “House of Mercy” but little mercy was shown to the hundreds who sought healing there. Although the King James Bible states that an angel of the Lord stirred up the healing waters, the older biblical manuscripts leave out that element of the story (see the explanation in *Desire of Ages*, 201). It would certainly have been strange for God to arrange a healing mechanism where the least sick are favored over the truly needy. What we know for sure is that, in this story, Jesus shows mercy at the place where people looked for mercy.

### **Implications of the Story**

Once again we discover that the stories in the Gospel of John serve as acted parables of who Jesus is and what He is like. Several aspects of this story cry out for attention. First of all, Jesus healed the man arbitrarily. He picked one man out of a whole crowd of people; a man who hadn't sought Jesus out, a man who didn't even know Him, a man who expressed no faith in Him before being healed. This reminds me of so many people who have told me that at a decisive point in their lives, God's hand was felt in ways they had not asked for and did not deserve. God does things like this, not to excuse sin, but so we can experience His grace, and thereby gain courage to deal with sin from that time on.

A second startling aspect to the story is that Jesus chose to heal the man on the Sabbath. The rabbis allowed for special acts on the Sabbath in emergencies, but this was no emergency. After all, the man had been crippled for thirty-eight years, surely a day or two's delay for the

sake of the Sabbath would not have made a major difference. So Jesus was deliberately making a point here. “It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath day,” Jesus had said in Matt 12:10. What was said there is acted here. The Sabbath is a day when activity for good is particularly appropriate. When we do good on the Sabbath, we model our actions on those which God does on that day.

Most interesting of all, however, is the implication of verse 14. When Jesus told the man to “stop sinning” He implied, first of all, that the man’s illness was caused by sin in some sense. Continued sin might result in a relapse of the paralysis. But there is an even deeper element here. The form of the word translated “sinning” is extremely continuous. This implies that the man had somehow been continuing in sin, even in a paralyzed state. What kind of sin was Jesus talking about? A paralyzed man cannot rob banks, commit adultery or kill anyone. Jesus must have been referring to sin of the mind. The man’s physical illness had resulted from unhealthy mental processes. The physical healing of the invalid was only the tip of the iceberg. Jesus was interested in healing the whole person.

The hurts of the past include not only physical injuries, but emotional, spiritual and psychological wounds. All these can and should be addressed by relationship with Jesus. All other things being equal, a genuine walk with Jesus brightens the facial expressions, soothes the emotions, warms the heart and brings renewed energy to the body. This is why Seventh-day Adventist Christianity is so concerned with things like diet, exercise and attitude. Genuine faith involves every part of life; mental, physical and emotional, as well as spiritual.

## **Dealing with Emotional Pain**

Having said this, most Christians readily acknowledge that their inner life, particularly the emotional aspect, remains quite unstable even after conversion. The “old nature” rises up again and again to trouble and to torment. Christians, as well as others, have to struggle with unhappy memories, flashes of anger, and unmentionable thoughts. Jesus cares at least as much about the inner life as He does about the outward circumstances.

Unwelcome thoughts and emotions can revolve around two types of past event, things we have done and things that have been done to us. Things we have done cause feelings of remorse, regret and failure. Memories of failure can cause us to become timid and cautious (“I never do anything right”), on the one hand, or reckless (“it doesn’t matter what I do”) on the other. Things others have done to us can cause feelings of anger, grief, and deep resentment. All of the above emotions came together as a result of a deep emotional wound that I experienced as a teen.

When I was in academy, my hero was the Bible teacher. I wanted above all else to be like him when I grew up. It just so happens that as a senior I was the quarterback on the best flagball team in the school. That meant that I had the dubious privilege of refereeing games in which I was not playing.

One day I refereed a game in which the Bible teacher had a rooting interest. Things turned sour almost from the first snap from center. “That was a stupid call! What’s the matter are you blind or something? How much is the other team paying you?” Similar comments shouted from the sideline poured out of his mouth for nearly an hour. I bravely acted as if I didn’t hear and continued doing my best.

Finally I followed a power sweep which ended up directly in front of the Bible teacher along the sideline. I was on top of the play and made the call as I saw it. He exploded in my face. “I can’t believe that call! You are ridiculous! I have never seen such a sorry display of refereeing in all my life!” Struggling to control my emotions I picked up the football and walked over to the Bible teacher and with a trembling voice said, “I’m sorry. I’m doing the best I can.” He looked me in the eye and said with a tone of contempt, “Your best isn’t good enough!”

I threw the finest spiral in all my years as a quarterback. It landed on the roof of a four story building near the playing field. I walked off the field to the sound of the gym teacher canceling the entire flagball season. I found the deepest, darkest corner of that academy and cried for two hours. No one could stop me. For months I waited to hear an apology but never received one. Ten years later I still found it difficult to tell this story without tears.

Why did I cry? Because when my personal hero told me that my best wasn’t good enough, I lost all hope for a time. I believed that my best would *never* be good enough. I learned that I could not trust those I cared about the most. The future looked dark and meaningless. Thankfully, as the years have gone by I have learned some practical steps by which people can open themselves up to the healing power of Jesus, not just in areas of physical health, but also in the emotional areas of their lives. I am slowly learning how to deal with painful memories and deep resentments. I am learning how to put the past behind me and move on.

Virtually everyone has had an experience like the one I had on the flagball field. Many have had a long string of similar experiences. The crucial issue in emotional healing is the how.

How can we overcome painful memories and emotional wounds? In cases where there has been severe abuse, or a record of extreme violence and/or promiscuity, the process of emotional healing will be necessarily long and complex. But over the years I have learned some strategies that have helped me along the road to recovery. Here's what I learned.

### **Putting the Past Behind You**

(1) *Choose Healing.* Many people prefer being right to being healed. They would rather be bitter and vindictive (enjoying the sense that someone else is to blame for their troubles) than to pursue the healing that can come only from forgiveness. That is why people often have to “hit bottom,” in other words, see their lives spiral into total disasters like divorce or addiction, before they are willing to seek healing change. People rarely recover from emotional pain until they want recovery more than anything.

(2) *Look the Past in the Eye.* Face the reality about things you have done or have been done to you. Seek authentic knowledge about the past. Through prayer, Bible study, journaling and accountability seek to sort out reality from the swirl of thoughts and emotions related to that reality. Accept responsibility for sinful choices you have made. Acknowledge the pain that comes from things over which you had no control (such as the attitude of a Bible teacher!).

Where emotional pain is connected with things that we have done to ourselves or to others (sin), true knowledge of the past leads to confession and repentance. Confession is simply telling the truth about ourselves. When combined with strategy number 8, it can have an incredibly healing effect.

(3) *Discover Your Value in God's Eyes.* It requires tremendous strength of character to look the past in the eye. This is rarely possible outside a relationship in which you know that you are fully accepted no matter what. The gospel teaches us that the most valuable Person in the universe knows all about us, yet loves us with unconditional love. God accepts us as we are. Our value to God is demonstrated at the cross. We are worth the infinite life of the precious Son of God. And because Jesus will never die again, we can know that He will never abandon us. When we grasp the value we have in God's eyes, we can begin to have the courage to face the past and deal with it.

(4) *Seek Support and Guidance.* Looking the past in the eye is easier when you have human support as well as divine. Finding friends you can trust is a crucial part of the recovery process. For many, especially the most traumatized, this process may need to begin with a professional counselor, someone who is trained to create a safe environment where people can talk about the things that trouble them the most. Small groups can be an excellent source of caring friends with listening ears.

(5) *Tell Your Story Over and Over.* A crucial part of emotional healing is to tell your story over and over. I used my flagball story (in places where the Bible teacher was not known) as part of a sermon on self-worth. Time and again I broke down in the telling of the story. But as time went on the story became less and less threatening to me, until I could tell it without pain.

Another way to process emotional pain is to write out a traumatic story, several times if necessary. The story can be read to oneself and others over and over, allowing the opportunity to

process the emotions related to the story.

(6) *Invite Jesus Into Your Traumatic Memories.* An excellent way to heal a traumatic memory is to invite Jesus into the scene. In your journal or your imagination consider how Jesus was affected by the event. What would He say to each person in the scene? How does He feel about you? About the person you hurt or who hurt you? Recreate the memory to include Jesus healing the situation. Make any restitution that He might direct. Accept His forgiveness as needed.

(7) *Forgive Those Who Have Hurt You.* To forgive someone else is sometimes a blessing to them, but it is always a blessing to us. Forgiveness is a choice. We may have to do it several times before it “sticks.” Resentment, hatred and anger may do little damage to another, but they always do heavy damage to us. To forgive is to break the chains of the past. To forgive is to find healing. Jesus longs to help us forgive.

(8) *Forgive Yourself.* This is usually harder than forgiving others. Forgive yourself for all the times that you have hurt other people out of your own emotional pain (make restitution where appropriate). Forgive yourself for judging and condemning those who have hurt you or those you love. In an atmosphere of confession and repentance, we place ourselves in the position where Jesus can help us forgive ourselves as well as others.

(9) *Build a New and Positive Record.* The day will come when the pain is gone but the scar is still there. We will remember, but it won't hurt anymore. When old records are healed, it is time to make new records, positive records. Remind yourself how valuable you are in Christ. Practice affirming and encouraging others. Use your story to connect with other hurting people

and begin making a positive difference in their lives.

Memorize Scripture to fill your mind with God's wisdom. As you grow, continue the strategies that lead to deeper authenticity. You can work through the above process again as fresh circumstances may require. Putting the past behind you is a lifelong process Christians sometimes call sanctification.

The Gospel of John assures us that Jesus cares about every aspect of our lives; mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. Abundant living doesn't have to wait until eternity, we can begin to taste it now (John 10:10). Jesus invites us to be part of the process.