

January 1, 2012

John 5:1-9, 39-40; 10:10

## **“The Edge of the Pool”**

**Chris Sturgeon**

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Good morning. Yes! Most exuberant return to my greeting I've gotten so far. Well done. I can tell you guys got to sleep a little bit extra. How many of you stayed up until midnight, saw the ball drop and counted down? Whoo. That's a lot of hands. I didn't. We had our own countdown whenever we felt like it and then went to bed last night. It was great. Did anybody eat black-eyed peas? Does anybody know why you would do that? No? Maybe that's just a Midwest... Oh, here is one. Here we go. So apparently if you eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Eve it's good luck. It means good luck for your new year, so it's too bad for you, I guess.

My name is Chris Sturgeon. I'm the middle school pastor here at this church, and I am so pleased to be with you on the very first day of 2012, which is awesome...2012. I love the New Year because we get to look ahead and nothing has gone wrong yet, so it's just beautiful and pristine. We're like, *This is the year I'm going to make it happen. This year we're doing it!* So we set resolutions.

Did you guys make New Year's resolutions? You know, a resolution where we decide to seriously commit ourselves to some kind of lofty goal for self-improvement that we work passionately to achieve every day over the entire next calendar week, maybe two weeks. Certainly we're done by February, and we decide we should have been a little more reasonable with our resolutions. The thing about real New Year's resolutions is they are always focused on some area where we want to get better. So we identify a part of ourselves where maybe we're not doing as well as we would like, and we say, "I want to be well."

There is a story in John's gospel where a man is asked the question, *"Do you want to get well?"* It creates an interchange that becomes the biggest turning point in this man's life. So we're going to talk about that today. This is the gospel of John, chapter 5, verses 1-9.

*"Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed."*

Quick note: If instead of reading this on a giant screen you were looking in your Bible right now, there would be a small little *b* right after the word *paralyzed* telling you there is a footnote, and that footnote is going to be important. We'll talk about that in a moment.

*"One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 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?' 'Sir,' the invalid replied, 'I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Get up! Pick up your*

*mat and walk.' At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath...'*

Now fortunately for us, our Bibles do have footnotes. They help us understand what's going on in this story a little bit more because there is a little notation in your Bible right after it says these people would come and wait by this pool, "*the blind, the lame, the paralyzed,*" and the footnote adds this: "And they waited for the moving of the waters. From time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters. The first person into the pool after each such disturbance would be cured of whatever disease they had."

Now the reason we have that note down at the bottom and not up in the main text is when John originally wrote the gospel, everybody he was writing to knew about the pool of Bethesda. It didn't need to be explained to them. But as the gospel traveled farther and as time passed, people were reading it and they didn't know that. So some thoughtful scribe, as he was copying out the gospel, added a little footnote so people like you and I, who didn't grow up next to the Sheep Gate, can know what's going on in this story.

So here is what it is. There is this pool in Jerusalem, and tradition held that occasionally the Lord would send an angel down to stir up the waters. When you saw the waters stirred, the first person who was able to get in would be cured of any disease he had. Any malady would be relieved. So as you can imagine, people would come and wait by this pool. Lots of people. Lots and lots of people. There is this great multitude of the most desperate and most needy people who would wait day in and day out, hoping against hope not only that today would be the day the water moved, but that they would be the first ones to get in after it did.

So we meet this man, and for 38 years he has waited. For 38 years he has lain beside this pool and watched other people be healed ahead of him. For 38 years his own hope has swelled, only to be immediately deflated again...38 years. One month from today, I will celebrate my thirtieth birthday. So for eight years longer than I have even been alive, this man has been lying on the ground waiting.

For this man, I cannot help but think this pool of healing has ultimately become a cruel place, a place where the most weak, where the most needy are lured in by the promise of this great mercy, only to find out it is a mercy that favors the strong and the less weak. Thirty-eight years ago this must have been a place of great hope for this man, but in the present, it has become a place that is entirely hopeless.

Here is the weird thing: he stays there. He stays there just the same. I think it's because this place has become all he knows now. It is not wonderful, but it's predictable. It is not great, but it's controllable and known. It's not the *best* life, but it is *a* life. He had a spot where he could lie all day and beg. He was in a place near a gate into the city where there would have been a constant influx of people walking by, and he had a story that surely would have elicited their sympathy. So here he waits.

Then comes Jesus. The Scriptures tell us Jesus knew before he spoke to the man that the man had been there for a long time. We don't know if he knew that supernaturally or if he just asked around, but we know Jesus knows this is not his first day there. This makes the question Jesus asks a rather curious one, because he says to this man, "*Do you want to get well?*" Seriously? Jesus, you're asking the paralyzed guy who's been next to the pool for healing for 38 years if he wants to get well? Of course he wants to get well! Everybody knows that. There is no reason to ask the question.

It's similar to asking our senior pastor, John Ortberg, if he wants to pet your cat. No, he doesn't, because John Ortberg hates your cat. He told me. You don't have to ask him that question. You already know. John never lets two weeks go by without putting in some sort of joke about hating cats.

So Jesus shows up and asks the man, "*Do you want to get well?*" I imagine the man answering back sarcastically with a little snarky comment like, "Do I want to be well? Oh no, no! I'm just here working on my tan. First-century chicks from Jerusalem love a bronzed dude, so I'm just working on that. And these stones? My goodness, they have done wonders on my back. I had this lumbar thing when I got here. You have to try this out."

No, of course he is going to say, "Yes!" The only possible answer for this man when asked, "*Do you want to get well?*" is *yes*. Except he doesn't say, "Yes." In fact, I think it may just be possible that at this point this man no longer has his eyes set on being made well. There is a psychological term called *secondary gain* some of you may be familiar with. It refers to all of the indirect positive things that come out of a negative situation. So the obvious example is you get a cold, you're not feeling well, and you have the sniffles. It's bad to have a cold, but if you're lucky somebody was going to take care of you through that, maybe bring you some soup, and you get a little extra attention. So the primary condition being sick is bad, but there are these secondary gains.

Thinking about this, I can remember a time when I was in college. I'm from Missouri and I went to college in Missouri. In Missouri it's cold in the winter. I was walking to a class early in the morning on a winter's day, and it was snowy. There was ice on the ground. I'm slipping all over the place. I felt like I needed to have a Pittsburgh Penguins jersey on so I could make it to my class.

I'm chugging along, and I'm going to take a test I'm not entirely prepared for the way I would have liked to have been. In addition to all of that, it's 8:00 a.m. in the morning. For those of you who have been out of college for a while, remember, when you are in college 8:00 a.m. was super early. So I'm cold, I'm going to take a test I don't want to take, I'm so tired I can barely move, and I'm on my way to take this exam. I just am filled with this deep sense of dread.

As is usually a good thing to do in that time, I begin to pray. I prayed something like, "Dear God, in your infinite mercy and abundant grace, please, please, please allow me to be struck by a car, God, not hard enough to do any sort of enduring damage, but just hard enough to need to go to the emergency room." Because if I went to the emergency room, I don't have to take the test. All kidding aside, I honestly, honestly was hoping a car would hit me. It didn't. I did later get hit by a figurative car when I took the exam.

The deal is this: Secondary gain can motivate you to do some incredibly unexpected things. It made me, with all seriousness, ask the Lord to help me be hit by a car, but it can also make a person who is sick miss out on a chance to be made well.

One of my duties here at the church is a couple of weeks out of the year I'm what's called *pastor on call*. We have a lot of pastors at this church, but there is always a pastor ready if anybody should call the church or show up at our front office and need to speak with a pastor.

So my very first year here, my first week of being pastor on call, my first day, I was super nervous because I was afraid I wouldn't be well enough equipped to deal with whoever may call. The phone rings.

I get called up to the front office. I walk in, trying to put all my trepidation aside, and I'm introduced to a man who for anonymity's sake we will call "Tom." Tom was sick and Tom needed help.

As we began to talk with Tom, he let me know he had a very serious skin condition that stretched from about halfway up his back all the way down his back to just above his knees. This skin condition was rash-like. He walked very, very gingerly because if he moved in the wrong way or too quickly, it would cause his skin to rupture, and he would begin to bleed. He was very sore, in a lot of pain. He came to us for help.

Then he explained to me, "I have medicine for this, but the medicine has to be diluted into a bathtub where I can then lie in the bath, and the rash will soak in the medicine." But Tom's problem was he didn't have a home, so he didn't have a bathtub to treat his condition with. So he asked me for enough money to rent a motel room for a few nights so he could take care of his condition. First year here, first week, first day, first call, and I have Tom, a man who had a very real need.

I decided we wanted to help Tom, but I wanted to do more for him than what he asked. So I grabbed two other people on our staff, Joanie Tankersley and Monte Fisher who know the area better than I do, and we began to make phone calls. Eventually we found a hospital in San Jose that would agree to admit and care for Tom free of charge. But it's in San Jose. Tom didn't have a car. So Monte offered right then and there, "I will drive you to San Jose, get you all checked in. They will take care of you. You'll be admitted."

So we go back to Tom, and I'm elated. I've gone from so nervous to so happy because this is what the church is supposed to do for people. I say, "Tom, we have found you a hospital, and they're going to take care of you for as long as it takes. It's not going to cost you anything. It's in San Jose, and Monte is ready to drive you there right now."

Then Tom said, "No, I won't go. That would take my whole day off the street. How would I get enough money to eat?" I said, "Tom, at the hospital they're going to give you three meals a day. You're going to have a roof over your head, and you can stay there as long as it takes to get better." Then he said, "No," again, and once more he asked me for money. When we declined to give it to him, he walked away in the same condition he was in when he walked through our doors.

**"Do you want to get well?"** It turns out to be a much more apt question than it originally appeared. We humans are remarkably adaptive creatures. We can learn to live in almost any situation and through almost any condition, and sometimes, just sometimes, we will settle for a life that is less than it should be. It's not wonderful, but it's predictable. It's not great, but it's controllable and known. It's not the *best* life, but it's *a* life.

So Jesus asks this man, **"Do you want to get well?"** The man's answer tells us a lot about where he is at because he doesn't actually answer Jesus' question. Jesus says, **"Do you want to get well?"** and the man immediately begins to explain why he is unable to get into the pool. He doesn't say *yes* or *no*. Perhaps there is an implied *yes* in that, but the focus is all about why he can't do it. **"Do you want to get well?"** "Yes, but I can't get into the pool." **"Do you want to get well?"** "Yes, but I am not going to that hospital in San Jose."

Fortunately none of us would ever answer a similar question that way. Do you want to invest in having the family you've always dreamed of? "Yes, but I just need to work a few more hours tonight." Do you want

to live a life that is free of the crushing burdens of debt? "Yes, but this Silicon Valley lifestyle does not come cheaply."

These are all the sorts of questions that our New Year's resolutions come out of. Do you want to find a hobby? Lose weight? Stop smoking? Quit drinking? Be happier? Work less? Stop worrying? Give back to your community? Help those who are less fortunate? Do you want to see your hairline finally win the battle with your forehead? That one may just be mine. Do you want to be a part of what the Lord is doing to bring healing and wholeness to this broken and lost world? "Yes, but..." We never run out of new ways to finish that sentence, and so we stay the same, lying on the edge of the pool...waiting.

It's one thing to recognize you aren't well, but it is another thing entirely to be able to change it. See Jesus knew this man was lying there waiting to see the water in the pool stirred. Instead of doing that, Jesus asks him a question that starts to stir the waters in the man's heart. Then Jesus does something truly miraculous. He says to this man, ***"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk."***

Well that must have been quite unexpected because for 38 years this man has stared at the pool, expecting the only way for healing to come to him would be to get into that pool at the right time. For all 38 years his timing had not been right. Then all of a sudden out of no where Jesus shows up and says, "Stand up and move along."

I can't help but think he had to get up and be so exuberant, joyful, dancing. It would have looked something like when Grandpa Joe gets invited to go to the chocolate factory with Charlie in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. He has been in the bed forever, he has this cane, and he dances. It's this amazing, amazing scene as he gets up. But this was surely incredibly, incredibly unexpected because the man was so focused on the waters in that pool that he seems to have missed the fact that he was speaking to somebody who had living water inside of him.

Here is the deal: If I'm honest, all too often that is my story, too. Maybe you can relate to that. I can get so focused on all of the things I don't have, so I stare off into this pool and I imagine the day when I will be able to get in it. I will have all the things I think I need in order to make me happy, all of my heart's desires. I will finally in that day be healthy and whole. We can look so fervently at the things we don't have that we miss the life that is happening all around us.

Maybe today your life isn't exactly what you thought it was going to be at this point, and you're not very happy about that. Maybe you can't help but think, *As soon as I get a couple of these needs met or these issues in my life ironed out, then life will really begin. Then I will be happy.* For some people in this room maybe it is the search to find that special someone to marry and live with. *Once I get that, once I reach that day, well then I'll have it made. Then life can really begin. I'll be happy.* So we stare off into this pool of marriage. For some of us maybe it's having children or being able to afford your own house or getting the right job or having the right friends or having the right body.

Jesus comes to this man who has spent 38 years focused on something he wasn't able to do, wasn't able to get, wasn't able to be, and he says, "Get up and walk because today you are healed. Today you are made whole. That pool over there will not make you well, but I will."

"The right relationship will not make you well, but I will. The right job won't. The right house won't. The right friends won't. The right body won't. The perfect family won't. The best schools, the most stylish

wardrobe, the coolest gadgets, admiration won't. Respect won't. Sex won't. Popularity won't. Prestige won't. Money won't. Promotions won't. Cars won't. All of the stuff in this entire world won't."

Jesus is saying, "None of these things can give you what you really want, what you really need, what the deepest part of your being is crying out for. None of these things can make you well, but I can and I will. So pick up your mat and walk." And he does. The man picks up his mat, and he begins to walk around in what is surely the most joyful strut you've ever seen in your life.

Then an incredibly bizarre and unexpected thing happens because as he walks along, somebody shouts at him, "Hey, stop it! Don't you know it's illegal to carry your mat on the Sabbath?" *Well I'll be darned.* Thirty-eight years of waiting, and he got healed on the wrong day.

Out of this scene Jesus reappears, and a debate begins to ensue between him and the Pharisees who are experts in the law. The Pharisees were claiming Jesus was in the wrong to heal this man on the Sabbath because healing was work, and work was to cease on the day God set aside. Jesus gives him a very long and what I find to be incredibly convincing reply, but there are two verses in there I think are especially important for us to focus on.

He says to these Pharisees, these people who are experts in the Scriptures, in verses 39 and 40, ***"You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."*** I think these Pharisees, despite the fact that these were faithful people who were working very hard to try to live the life God had asked them to live, are in the exact same position the paralyzed man was. They come to church. They sit in the same pew every single Sunday. They study the Scriptures that testify about who Jesus is all day every day, most of them for a lot longer than 38 years, and yet somehow they are unable to grasp the life Jesus has come to give them.

Just like the paralyzed man, the Pharisees are lying on the edge of the pool, tantalizingly close but yet somehow unable to get into the waters. So they make themselves as comfortable as they can, and they live their lives. It's not wonderful, but it's predictable. It's not great, but it's controllable and known. It's not the *best* life, but it's *a* life.

Oftentimes when I read the Scriptures, it's easy to immediately associate myself with the protagonist or with the good guys, which makes it then really easy to look at the Pharisees in a story like this and be like, "How can they be so blind? How can they be so dumb? Pharisees? They're more like Pharistupids." Yeah, there is a little rumble. Here is the thing: I work with middle school kids, and that joke kills with middle school kids. *Note to self: Stops working after eighth grade. Got it.*

The truth is, though, if I evaluate the Scriptures and myself honestly, all too often I look a lot more like the Pharisees than I look like Jesus. I don't think I'm alone in that. I think there are other people who join me in this room who can become content lying on the edge of the pool.

We've heard about Jesus, and we've maybe come in for a closer look. We hear about all these amazing stories and testimonies about how people's lives have been radically altered and miraculously filled by the love of God, people who have had addictions broken, marriages that have been restored, broken and sad people injected with the joy of the Lord. We get close enough to see an angel stirring the waters over there, but not close enough to have the waters stirred inside of ourselves. I think the longer we come close

and see other people receiving this kind of life and healing, the more we can convince ourselves that sort of life is just not for me. Those things are unattainable for me. Yes, I want that, but...

Maybe you've felt there is a contrast between what it said about Jesus on the one hand and what you have experienced in your own life on the other, because we Christians can talk a really big game about what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. We tell you it will give you purpose and meaning for your life, provides comfort for the broken, community and relationship for the lonely, freedom from guilt, the forgiveness of sins, peace in your life, a sense of wholeness, and let's not forget the *coup de grâce*: the eternal salvation of your souls. I imagine there is at least one person in this room who feels like this whole Christianity thing has been overpromised and under-delivered upon in your life.

Maybe today you're living a life that's not wonderful, but it's predictable. It's not great, but it's controllable and known. It's not the *best* life, but it's *my* life. **"Do you want to get well?"** Because the truth is you simply cannot oversell what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. This is an invitation as well as it is a question. The healing and full life and wholeness Jesus came to bring to this world is available to you. A life that goes so far beyond just sustaining yourself from day to day is available to you, a life that is directed by a deeply felt sense of purpose and meaning in this world. Connection, forgiveness, justice, and peace are available to you because Jesus Christ can give you the ability to pick up your mat and walk.

Jesus will say later in John's gospel, **"I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."** In some translations it's translated, **"...that they may have life, and have it to the full."** If you are hungry for that kind of life, if you are weary of staring off into pools that don't deliver on what they promise or of chasing after all the things that can't or won't make you truly, truly well, then know this: Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is forever at your side saying, "I can and I will. Give me your burdens and your guilt and your worries and all of your troubles. Put your life into my hands, and I will take care of you."

In just a moment I will pray, and that will serve as our benediction and the end of church today. So you'll be dismissed after I say, "Amen." We do want you to know as always we will have people available here at the front to pray with you.

Pray with me: Our God, we thank you for this New Year and the hope and promise it brings. God, we lay before you saying, "We want to be well." God, be with each one of us. Help us to live fully into the life you have intended for each of us. It's in your name we pray, amen.