

LESSON ONE

HIKE: HELPLESS TO HOPEFUL

JESUS MEETS A MAN BY A POOL
JOHN 5:1-9

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing,
that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”
Romans 15:13

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

Planning a vacation can sometimes be just as fun as the trip itself. You think about where you want to go, how you'll get there, what you want to do when you arrive, where you'll eat. You get the idea. If it's been some time since you traveled, you may find yourself getting excited about taking a trip. On the other hand, you might even find that technological advances have made such leaps that you need assistance to enjoy your vacation. Don't worry; for this excursion, you won't need your smartphone, a laptop, or even a travel agent. In this VBS, we invite you go off the beaten path with us. We're lacing up our hiking boots and hitting the trail for an Australian adventure with a faithful guide—Jesus.

Have you gone hiking before? A comedian once remarked that hiking is the only sport that you can say that you do well even if you've never done it because it's basically walking. That's kind of true. In simple terms, hiking is taking a long walk, especially in the country or in a wooded area. Your proximity to a wooded area doesn't matter. Almost every city touts its abundance of hiking trails whether those trails are wide streets just off the financial district or winding loops near a beautiful waterfall 50 miles from anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection.

A great hike can be just a couple of miles, or it can be an arduous journey that takes weeks to finish. It's common to meet a number of other hikers along the route you choose. Some of those people may be new to hiking or may have been heading out to explore paths for years. Either way, those people have a story to tell. The man Jesus encountered in this first Bible story certainly had quite the story to tell after his fateful meeting.

Let's hike over to John 5 and meet a man who could not walk, but by the time he had done as Jesus instructed, he was able to stroll, saunter, wander, or run wherever he wanted to go.

RISE AND WALK

While in Jerusalem to celebrate one of the annual Jewish feasts, most likely the Passover, Jesus passed by the pool of Bethesda. This pool was located just north of the Temple mount near the sheep gate, a passage used to bring sheep to the Temple. It was a large pool surrounded by porches on all four sides with the porch dissecting the center of the pool, giving it five porches. In Hebrew, Bethesda means, "House of mercy," likely named so because the pool was believed to have healing powers. Possibly originating from underground springs, the pool would occasionally begin to bubble, and it was believed that the first person who entered the pool when it started to bubble up would be healed of whatever ailment plagued him. It is difficult for us in the 21st century to imagine this legend to be true, and some biblical translations taken from earlier manuscripts have even omitted verse 4, alleging that its words were added by later scribes.

Nevertheless, many of that day believed in the healing powers of the pool of Bethesda, and because of this, Scripture tells us that around the pool lay a “multitude” of the sick, lame, blind, and paralyzed. One among the many was a man who had been infirm for 38 years. We can assume that, for the duration of that time, he sat there every day, all day long, just waiting for something to happen. For approximately 15,570 days, the same man sat in the same spot with the same result: absolute no change. We know little of his mental or emotional state, but there is little doubt he likely felt insignificant, invisible, and helpless. He was without hope.

Then came the day he met Jesus. Even though he had been practically invisible for almost 40 years, on this day, Jesus saw him among all the others. This man’s innermost thoughts and desires were no less visible to Jesus than his physical condition. Even so, Jesus probed for transparency on the man’s part by asking, “Do you want to be made well?” It is a legitimate question. After all, a man had been lying there for 38 years. At the very least, it was safe and familiar, though change might be uncomfortable. Jesus knew the difficulty of helping someone with no ambition or desire to be helped. “Is this what you want from life or do you truly want to be healed? Do you want to be made well?”

The man responded with a rationale for his loss of ambition, “Sir, I have no man to help me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, not many steps down before me.” It’s apparent that this man had no friends or family, and this absence of help had caused him to lose hope. Yet, in a singular moment, his hope was restored with just one simple directive from Jesus: “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” Ironically, though Jesus gave this man hope through divine power, Jesus actually commanded the man to help himself. Jesus did not stoop down to the man’s level, take his hands, and help him to his feet. Jesus told him to get up, pick up his bed, and leave. And that’s exactly what happened.

You've most likely read this story from John 5 many times. Have you ever considered what happened to this man after his encounter with Jesus? Scripture doesn't update us on his life afterward. We don't know if he went back to the pool to visit others. We don't know if he strolled the streets of Jerusalem. We don't know if he got a job. We don't know if he married and started a family. We don't know if he shared his experience and told others about Jesus. What we do know is that all the things that were possible for him because Jesus gave him hope.

Have you ever contemplated how this story relates to all of us, too? Like the man who couldn't walk, we are broken, feeble, disabled, and shattered. We need the hope that only Jesus can provide. Like the man by the pool, we can't always control our circumstances, but we can control our reactions to them. Like the man Jesus cured, we must realize that any life-changing transformation will require some action on our part. Need some help hanging onto hope? Here are a few key factors to remember:

Keep a proper perspective when you're feeling down. That proper perspective is in Scripture, so read these verses for personal reflection:

**JOHN 16:33 • PSALM 137:7-9 • 1 PETER 1:6-8 • JAMES 1:2-4
GALATIANS 6:5 • 1 PETER 2:19-23 • ROMANS 5:2-5
2 CORINTHIANS 4:16-18 • REVELATION 21:4**

We were never promised a life without trials. As long as we are part of this fallen world, adversity will be the norm. How we deal with those trials can be constructive as long as we keep the appropriate, biblical perspective. That means we must remember that trials are temporary (see 2 Corinthians 4:16-18); adversities shape us, help to mature us, and can complete us (see James 1:2-4); and complications help us to appreciate what is ahead (see Revelation 21:4). It also helps to remember that without those times when we feel discouraged, there wouldn't be times when we feel inspired.

Persevere through trials. Read these verses for personal study:

JAMES 1:12 • HEBREWS 12:1 • ROMANS 8:24-25
HEBREWS 6:11 • PHILIPPIANS 3:13-14 • PSALM 71:14
PSALM 31:24 • ROMANS 12:12 • HEBREWS 10:36

Review the text from John 5. What question did Jesus ask the man at the pool of Bethesda? That's the question that all of us must ultimately answer: "Do you want to be made well?" Sometimes it's just easier to surrender to our deficiencies than to try to conquer them. However, a life-changing encounter with Jesus usually requires that we have a willing, faithful heart. Hardship and misery only last if we allow it. We will be outlasted. Resolve to turn a blind eye to the past, and keep an eager eye on what lies ahead (see Philippians 3:13-14). Keep this thought in mind: "Your journey will be much lighter and easier if you don't carry your past with you."

Realize that hope is found only in Jesus. Read these verses for personal study and reflection:

PSALM 34:15 • PSALM 118 • JEREMIAH 29:11
2 THESSALONIAN 1:11 • PSALM 33:18-19 • PSALM 121:2-5
PSALM 130:5 • PSALM 46:1 • LUKE 4:17-18

If you have or know someone who has battled with hope, then you know that there's often a sense of feeling anonymous or insignificant. It's that feeling that no one cares about you, and no one sees you. Over time, there may even be a feeling that God doesn't see or care about them. The resulting helplessness gives way to false remedies of hope. The same was true of the man at the pool of Bethesda. Remember, he had been lame for 38 years, putting his hope in being the first one to dip into the bubbling water to cure himself of his maladies. That pool was not his answer. His answer was the same answer we have today: a heart that's willing and open to a relationship with Jesus. Our trials are never hidden from Him. Jesus sees us just as He saw this man. He sees and cares about all those who place their hope in Him (see Psalm 34:15).

Those who admit they need Jesus most and look to Him for their future have a special place in Jesus' heart. Jesus tells us in Luke 4:17-18, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."*

As we hike the paths of life, let's be sure to remain open to life-changing encounters with Jesus. There may be times in which opportunities aren't obvious. If we're doing well and are happy, we may feel we even need Jesus. When He was in Galilee, Jerusalem, and Israel, Jesus spent His time with those who were sick, outcast, and desperate. Those were the ones who needed hope, and that's what He provides to everyone who needs it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The man who couldn't walk looked to a pool at Bethesda as false hope for almost 40 years. What are some of the false sources of hope people turn to today?
2. Re-read 1 Peter 1:6-7 and explain how perspective plays a role in our ability to overcome tribulations.
3. In hiking, you're hopeless to hopeful, why was it important for the man who couldn't walk to help himself to stand? What does this suggest about the role we play in overcoming tribulations?
4. Re-read 1 Corinthians 4:18. How does having a proper perspective of our place on earth help us persevere through difficulties?