

**“Questions about Healing”**  
**John 5:1–9**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
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I remember the first time I studied the text from John 5. I was in college and the leader of the study focused on Jesus’ question to the man by the Pool of Bethzatha about whether he wants to get well. It seemed like an odd, if not unkind, question. Who wouldn’t want to be well?

But over the years I have learned that there are many reasons why people don’t want to get well or at least won’t go along with what wellness requires. The addict who wants to be free of addiction but not the substance to which he is addicted; the person struggling with cardiovascular disease who cannot change her genetic history but could exercise more, eat a healthier diet, quit smoking, and address her stress level, but chooses not to make any of these changes; the patient struggling with schizophrenia who refuses to take meds or attend counseling that could make possible a better life...

The most extreme case I know of was a church member in another setting whose mother was codependent with her alcoholism. Mom had allowed her to move back home years before and enabled her in one way after another. It seemed like neither one of them wanted her to get well, or at least they were not acting in ways that could have led to health.

Neighbors would call the woman’s brother or the church periodically and ask how we could claim to care about the women, know how much they struggled financially, and not be willing to help them. We told them we had many times, but whatever we bought, including air conditioning units, the daughter would sell so that she had money to feed her habit. This went on until she was 82... I mean, until the daughter was 82. The mother was 102 and still looking after her daughter.

Yes, there are times when people do not want to get well, or perhaps we might say they are not willing to do what it takes to get well. If that is ever going to change, it usually requires a different strategy of intervention, something jolting, “tough love” we might say.

Perhaps this is what Jesus is offering the man by the pool. He has been ill for 38 years, and realizing he has been there a long time, Jesus asks, “Do you want to be made well?” The man says that when the water is stirred up and thus healing might be possible, he has no one to help him get in the water. So, someone else always gets ahead of him. Apparently, there is a limited time when one can be healed.

Is this a reasonable explanation or a refined rationalization? I mean, in 38 years there has been no one to help? Ever? Others may have asked the man the same question, he may have given the same response, and they may have engaged him in an extensive conversation about this, checking out his story, suggesting strategies of response. Jesus does none of this. He simply looks at the man and says, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” He does, and at once he is made well, he takes up his mat, and he begins to walk!

It is a miracle but what kind of miracle? Is it physical, he recovers an ability? Is it mental or emotional, he discovers the will to act? Is it spiritual, his whole being is transformed? Perhaps all the above! Sometimes a mental or emotional change is just as miraculous and essential as a physical one — seeking treatment for a physical or psychological malady, pursuing reconciliation in a relationship that is damaged or broken, finding purpose and joy again after a devastating loss. Healing often functions on multiple levels, but ultimately our yearning to get well is required so as to motivate us to work through all that is required for healing.

Reading the story this way, Jesus’ question doesn’t seem odd or unkind. It seems insightful; provoking, though in a redemptive way; almost Socratic. We might think Jesus could just heal the man and send him on his way, and perhaps he could, but this is a more empowering way to heal. It will help him much more in the future.

And yet, while this leaves me feeling better about the story and Jesus than I did nearly forty-five years ago, and while it offers insight into how God works for healing in our lives, I feel a need to ask another question. What about those occasions where no healing occurs? Many people we know and love want to be made well, they pray earnestly and have faith in God and Jesus, but they do not get well from whatever ails them, be it life-threatening,

life-debilitating, or just a nuisance. How do we make sense of these experiences as we read biblical stories like this?

I have worked with many people over the years who categorize this kind of question as overthinking. They yearn for a miracle for themselves or someone close to them, they trust that God will provide it, but if it doesn't happen, they find some explanation or rationalization like, "She is in a better place," and move on, with little impact on their thinking or faith, other than the usual sadness at loss.

I had this experience with the daughter-in-law of church members in another setting. She and their son, along with the grandchildren were part of a church with charismatic leanings, one expression of which was periodic healing services. The daughter-in-law had stage-four cancer, and both her husband and his father were doctors, but the woman and some in the family knew she would be healed, while others worried how these family members would respond if she was not. She was not. Sadly, she died not that long after this time, leaving some devastated, but not those who were able to pivot and accept a different explanation.

My brain doesn't work that way, maybe yours does, and that is okay. We all have to develop a framework for understanding the world that works for us. But my answer to the question of what we do when healing is not experienced is simply to acknowledge that there are no guarantees, even for the most faithful.

My theology professor and friend, Frank Tupper, who lost his wife to cancer when their children were young, used to say that God does the most God can do in the context of certain given realities of life. God is all-loving and involved in the created world, but God does not turn everything upside down in response to every need. If we jump off a building, the laws of gravity will pull us down.

I have known people who have overcome incredible odds and become well when doing so did not seem possible. Some of them called this a miracle, either God working through medical resources or counselors, or God transcending all realities we understand. I visited a man in a coma for a month whose doctors said he had zero chance of recovering consciousness. I walked into his room one day and he was sitting in a chair playing solitaire. "You're not suppose to be here," I said, to which he replied, "People keep

saying that, but here I am.” It was some kind of miracle. We all know stories like this.

However, we also all know stories, many close to us, of wonderful people who did not experience a miracle. My mother had a cerebral aneurysm bleed at 48 and died three weeks later. A good friend of ours died last fall two weeks after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. I have worked with people living with an array of addictions and mental health challenges who have yearned with all their being to be well, and a few have eventually become well, but the vast majority have not.

In all these cases, there has been no predictive formula of who became well and who did not, no act of faith produced a miracle. Some people pick up their mat and walk while others do not. And there is no easy answer to the question of why.

But perhaps there is another way to look at some situations — not all, but some. Healing can take many different forms. Sometimes we get well, just not in the ways we want.

In his book *The Philippian Fragment* Calvin Miller includes the writing of a fictional early church leader who reflects on the early church in a way that speaks to contemporary issues. In one chapter, he begins by referencing his disdain for a faith healer named Hiram of Hellespoint who claimed that anyone who touched his sequined toga would be instantly healed. He lost favor in West Asia when he could not get relief from a toothache.

Another healer the author admires, Helen of Hierapolis, came to Philippi with a conviction that God loves those who suffer and a desire to participate in that love. She didn’t even try to heal a group of blind beggars she passed but gave each of them a new cane and reminded them that the curbs on Caesar’s Boulevard were very high.

One day she passed an amputee selling styluses. She touched his legs and cried, “Grow back! Grow back! In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, grow back!” She waited a moment and nothing happened. So, she sat down, crossed her legs on the cold pavement and started selling styluses with him. Soon they were talking and laughing together, having a wonderful time. When it was time to go, she had a little trouble standing, and the man said, “Grow strong! Grow strong! Grow strong!” and she staggered to her feet.

Then, she looked down at her new friend and said, “I offer you healing, you will see. It is only one world away. Someday...” she stopped and smiled, “you will enter a new life and you will hear our Savior say to your legless stumps, ‘Grow long! Grow long!’ And then, you will know that glory Sister Helen only dreamed for you.”

The man smiled and said, “Do you heal everyone this way?” “It is better to heal with promises than to promise healing,” she said to which he replied that she was right, but more than that, she was evidence that God heals the spirits of those who suffer even when their suffering cannot be undone.

Healing takes many forms — sometimes it is physical, sometimes it is the gift of friendship, sometimes it is the hope of eternity — but God does offer to heal our spirits in the midst of whatever suffering we face.

In this month’s issue of *The Christian Century* New Testament professor Audrey West tells a story about her 93-year-old mother whose aging body no longer supports her will to live (May 2025, p.28). She has a rare blood disease combined with what she calls a death squad that haunts aged bodies — pneumonia, sepsis, heart failure, and muscle atrophy. She experiences no physical healing, but life is still beautiful.

Every Thursday afternoon a neighbor from church drops by with a backyard bouquet, a grocery store orchid, or a bakery treat. Stories are shared, and the visits end with a kiss on the forehead and a prayer. A beloved long-time caregiver arrives early enough to take her mother’s dog for a much-needed walk. Friends from a local dog-training class stop by for a visit once a month and regale her with stories from their class while their canine companions show off their tail-wagging skills.

West concludes by saying the smiles and laughter — along with a few nuzzles from the dogs — bring light and life and connection to her mother’s days, along with a reminder that she is not forgotten or alone. She does not rise, take up her bed and walk, but the gifts of life and love mirror the healing Jesus brings the man at the pool of Bethzatha. Such in the healing God offers.