

THE FIRST SPIRITUAL QUESTION: DO YOU WANT TO GET WELL?



Our first spiritual question can be found in the story about Jesus healing a man at the pool of Bethesda found in John 5:1-9. I think that when most of us read a gospel story like this, we focus on the act of healing that takes place. That is truly miraculous. If that is all we did, however, we would miss the really meaningful and short interaction that Jesus has with a man who is an invalid. As we will see, we all have a part in an act of healing. There is nothing God can do for any of us, given our free will, if we are not willing to let him heal us.

As we should always do, let us seek to understand the context of this story.

John 5:1-9

“Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews” (v. 1). We know that in the Jewish calendar there are three main feasts. Given the timing of this story in the life of Jesus, the feast referred to here was probably Pentecost, one of

the most important events in the Jewish calendar. It was customary for Jews from all over to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for this feast. Jesus was not from the capital city, and the verse says Jesus went there for this purpose. It would be customary for the honorable Jewish man to “hang out” in the temple or be involved in religious activities. Already at this time Jesus was considered a teacher and a rabbi, and he may have come to exercise his right to teach, although he hadn’t begun yet.

“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” (v. 2). This gate was included in Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in 445 BC. It is one of ten gates listed in Neh. 3 as part of that project. Some of the gates, like this one, were named for the activity that went through them. In this case, sheep were led into the city for the sacrifice. There is also, for example, the Fish Gate, the Horse Gate, the Water Gate, and (my personal favorite) the Dung Gate. The Dung Gate was the gate through which the garbage was taken to be burned outside the city.

In Jesus’ day the pool of Bethesda was surrounded by five decorated colonnades that were like interior covered porches. The only time the name Bethesda appears in the Bible is in this verse in John. The name Bethesda means “house of mercy.” The source of the pool was a nearby spring. The historian Josephus many years later described a pool that was part of the sheep market. In recent years the site of the pool has been excavated and can be visited. In our day, the name Bethesda

has been used for hospitals, like Bethesda Naval Hospital, and for ministries that focus on healing and mercy.

“Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed” (v. 3). This pool must have had a wonderful reputation for healing, since a “great number” of really sick people came to lie there.

“For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred up the water; then whoever stepped in first, after the stirring of the water, was made well of whatever disease he had” (v. 4, NKJV). The great tradition of this pool was its healing property. At periods during the day an angel would come down and swirl or stir the waters, and the first person to get in would be healed of whatever disease he or she had. Some translations of the Bible, such as the *American Standard Version* and the King James Version, refer to what the angel did as “troubling” the water. I like this translation in some ways for what it might mean to the spiritual message of the story. “Troubled waters,” with apologies to Simon and Garfunkel, have at times shown us that they can strengthen us or that we can build bridges over them.

Imagine how challenging it would have been to be the first person in the pool if you were blind, lame, or paralyzed. It was a naturally competitive situation and could have been an exercise in continual frustration for many. Some commentators have said that the healing that took place was because of the cleansing nature of the water. It was natural water from a spring, and so the reference to water here, they suggest, is only symbolic of the real healing available through God. Whether

or not a heavenly angel did something mystical or sacramental to the water to give it healing qualities is not as important as realizing that God is responsible for the healing. But what is clear is that throughout the Bible water is continually used as a symbol of cleansing and healing. Not the least of this is represented in the cleansing power of water in baptism.

“One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years” (v. 5). What first strikes me about this verse is how this man must have felt. He had been coming to this pool every day for thirty-eight years and hadn’t been healed. Wouldn’t he be feeling a great deal of despair and desperation? How envious he must have been of those who did get healed. Remember, if you had to be the first in the pool, this man would have had no chance. Yet he still came. As we continue our study of this story, think about what you would be like if every day for thirty-eight years you had gone through the same routine. Might it not be true that any of us would get so used to this routine that it would become “normal.” We would know the role and how to play it. Consider also that even though we aren’t told how old the man was or how old he was when he became an invalid, thirty-eight years was already longer than the normal life expectancy in those days. For this man, it was a very long time.

Then, of course, we must understand what the word “invalid” means. “Invalid” is the English word used in the *New International Version*. Does this mean the man is “not valid,” that is, “not real”? Other translations, such as the King James Version, use the word “infirmity.” The *New Living Translation* simply says

that this man was “sick.” Have you not always thought, as I did, that since Jesus tells him to “rise up” and to “walk,” he must have been one of the paralyzed ones mentioned elsewhere in the gospel? Remember that Jesus spoke in Aramaic and John wrote in a Greek. The Greek word is *astheneia* and can mean a weakness of mind or body. The word can refer to a physical sickness or a moral weakness. It could have been a muscle weakness, since *astheneia* is the Greek root word of the medical condition in English called myasthenia gravis. In other New Testament verses *astheneia* is also used to refer to a weakness of soul (Rom. 6:19); a lack of human wisdom, skill in speaking, or leadership of men (1 Cor. 2–3); an inability to restrain corrupt desires and a proclivity to sin (Heb. 5:2); and/or an inability to bear trials and troubles (Rom. 8:26).

Given the general description of the crowd that gathered at the pool, most commentators on this passage believe that “invalid” or “infirmity” here refers to a physical weakness. I accept this interpretation, but as we will see, the truth of the question Jesus will ask can also be applied to a weakness of mind or soul.

“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?’” (v. 6). Let’s start to put some of this scene together so we can understand how remarkable this question is. First, the pool of Bethesda was known to have healing properties. Second, a great number of sick gathered there trying to be the first one in the pool. Third, one of them was a man who had been there for thirty-eight years. Fourth, he had some kind of weakness or infirmity. Now, if you were made aware

of all of this, what would your questions have been? The first one that comes to my mind is, "How can I help?" I think I am a helpful person. But I am also a competitive person, so I also think of saying, "Let me help you and together we'll be the first one in the pool."

Perhaps you would ask the man, "How did you get this way? What happened?" In those days, in Jewish theology based on the Old Testament, there was an assumption that if a man was sick, it might be because either he or one of his recent ancestors sinned. Both Exod. 20:5 and Deut. 5:9 say that God will punish "the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation." So perhaps your question could be, "What sin did you or your fathers commit to be punished in this way?"

I am a pastoral counselor and some of my training was simply to be a good listener and to be compassionate. This part of me might say, "Being here like this for thirty-eight years must be hard. Tell me about it."

On the other hand, who in their right mind would ask a man who has been coming to a healing pool for thirty-eight years if he wants to be healed or to get well? What was Jesus thinking? Wouldn't the answer to that question be obvious? I believe the wisdom of Jesus is far ahead of ours. He knows our soul and mind so much better than we do. In this case, my belief is that Jesus knew that for healing to take place, the mind and soul of the man needed to be willing for it to happen. That sounds strange because why would anyone not want healing to happen? For now, hold this thought and I will return to it later.

We must also understand through our word study what Jesus meant when he asked if the man wanted to be healed, to be made whole, or to get well depending on the translation. The Greek word here is *hugiēs* (hoog-ee-ace), which can mean “healthy” or “sound in body.”³ This word can also mean, figuratively, “sound” as in “sound speech,” that is, “teaching which does not deviate from the truth.”⁴

When you look at the broader meaning of the word used here, it is clear that Jesus was asking the man about physical healing; and because the word can refer to having “sound speech” or to staying in line with the truth, Jesus may also have been asking about soul healing. Jesus was perhaps associating this man’s mental or spiritual well-being with his physical well-being. This also speaks to the willingness factor in this passage.

“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’” (v. 7). I don’t know about you, but if Jesus were asking me a question about healing, I would give an emphatic yes. I wouldn’t mince words or make any excuses. I would go for it. The tone of this answer reflects this man’s frustration. He was being a victim. He had no one to help, and in the competition of the moment, someone got in his way. He was no doubt angry and discouraged.

“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” (vv. 8-9). If the man was looking for Jesus to sympathize with him about how terrible life is, Jesus went one better.

He healed him. There are other times in the Bible when Jesus teaches that faith makes you well. There are times when people in dramatic faith come to Jesus to be healed. This time, Jesus heals and he is the One who has come to the man and this man seemingly has no faith.

With this understanding of the text, how can we apply this question to ourselves?

What Is Your Sickness?

I suspect that all of you who picked this book up are wondering about spiritual and emotional integrity. If you aren't, then why read it. I also suspect you sense a problem in your life that is blocking you from having integrity. What is that? Is it a physical malady that you are struggling with? Is it emotional wholeness that you seek? Perhaps you don't fully believe you have spiritual maturity. Remember from our word study of this story, the nature of the man's sickness was probably some kind of muscle weakness, but there was also the possibility that something was not quite whole about this man spiritually or emotionally.

In this book, I really want to address the spiritual and emotional qualities of wholeness, health, and integrity. I will leave our theological understanding of physical healing to others who are more qualified or have greater wisdom about that. I am a diabetic, and believe me, I have prayed for God to heal me. After thirty-five years of being diabetic, my prayers today are more about controlling my disease and avoiding the consequences of it. While God has not healed me in a dramatic way, he has allowed a certain amount of peace about

it spiritually and emotionally. I don't fight against it as I did at one time. For quite some time, I was really angry, but now there is a general acceptance. I do believe that having spiritual and emotional peace is a huge contributor to my physical well-being. When I don't have that, I have a great deal of stress in my life, and that is definitely not good for my blood sugar.

When I was first diagnosed, a friend reminded me of Paul's wonderful teaching about our bodies in 2 Cor. 4:7-12:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Every day when I give myself insulin and check my blood sugar, I think particularly of verse 10: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." When my diabetic self asks the first spiritual question, "Do I want to get well?" my answer seeks to remember that if it were not for the insulin I take every day, I would die. My body and my disease reflect the death of Jesus. But if I remember that my body is only a "jar of clay" and that my spirit inside is so much more important, my answer is that I will use my disease to glorify my hope in an

eternal resurrection only possible through Jesus. "Yes, Jesus, I want to be healed, healed or whole spiritually, if not physically.

✳ **KEY QUESTIONS**

- Do you suffer from a physical disease?
- Do you live every day with anxiety about your physical health?
- Are you in chronic pain?
- What is your attitude about this suffering? Are you angry with God that it has not been healed?
- If physical healing is not possible, are you willing to be well or whole regarding your feelings about this physical problem?

Perhaps you come to this book because of emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, anger management, ADHD, or manic depression. These problems can be mental health issues that some people deal with for years or their entire lives. Maybe you've been lying by the pool in some doctor's or counselor's office hoping for new answers. Drugs have been suggested and you've tried them, but they don't seem to

really heal you. You've talked to many professionals, including pastors, about this, but you wind up thinking there is no one to help you. At least, there has been no one who really seems to know what he or she is doing.

You could be so used to your unhealthy feelings that they seem like a part of your life. You've always been depressed or anxious. You've always had attention issues. Despite many attempts to stop, you still get angry. Every time you try to be upbeat, peaceful, focused, or calm, some stressful situation sends you back into your feelings. It seems as though something always gets in your way. When you imagine that Jesus is asking you if you want to be well, you say, "I've tried, I just can't shake this."

Could it be problems with addiction that you seek healing for? That was my story for twenty-five years. I first remember, at age eleven, standing around a campfire at summer camp and the director asking all of us if we'd like to give up our number one sin. I had been looking at pornography for a year and knew even then that I needed to give it up. So since I didn't know the word "pornography" back then, I wrote down the name of the magazine I would steal on a piece of paper. The director said that if we were truly repentant, God would forgive us of this sin and we would never struggle with it again. I was hopeful, but I was no sooner home from the camp when the temptation came over me again and I went back to it. Have you ever struggled with pornography these days on the Internet? Maybe you're having an affair, either emotionally or sexually with someone else.

Is it drinking, smoking, or using drugs that you struggle with? You've told yourself a thousand times that you want to quit but haven't been able to. Or is it gambling or compulsive spending that addicts you? You've lost large sums of money, but nothing seems to stop you. Maybe food is the enemy. You've tried to stop overeating many times but find yourself over and over again stuffing yourself with food that isn't good for you. It might not be an addiction, but you've tried to lose weight and just can't stay with a diet or exercise program.

If it is an addiction, you might be telling yourself that you can really quit if you wanted to. Maybe you've stopped for a while and found that you can't stay stopped. Others have complained that you need to stop. If you're a smoker, even your kids have come home from school with all kinds of "helpful" information about the dangers of doing that. It could be that you've talked to a pastor, counselor, or doctor and you weren't really able to put into practice what he or she was telling you that you needed to do. You hear the question from Jesus about getting well and you say, "Yes, heal me as long as I don't have to do any of the work, because I've tried and failed."

Some of you reading this book are having relationship problems, in your marriage, in your family, with your friends. You feel lonely, misunderstood, and that no one likes you. In the evening or on weekends you find yourself without anyone to be with. You eat alone and watch way too much TV.

You've said to yourself that your spouse doesn't "get it," or doesn't meet your needs. Sex happens too often or not often enough. Money is a problem. The kids seem out of control.

Sometimes you wonder if you've married the right person. Your spouse always seems angry at you and always complains. When you hear Jesus' question, you are thinking, "Could he really heal my marriage?"

With all of the above, or at least some of it, you suffer from shame. Shame is the feeling that you are somehow defective, that you are not a worthy person. You believe that no one would like you if he or she really knew you. Your experience tells you that no one takes care of your needs. You are afraid to be honest about all of your thoughts and behaviors because you're afraid of what others would think.

Shame can be a feeling or self-perception that we grow up with. If we don't get enough love or nurture in our families, we can develop shame, telling ourselves we're just not worth it. Some people have been sexually and/or physically abused as children. They believe that somehow they caused the abuse or deserved it. These people say to themselves, "If I was a good person, these things wouldn't have happened to me." Maybe you weren't affirmed or praised. Nobody listened to you. You didn't get held or touched. You continually felt left out. Any of these dynamics can create a deep sense of shame in a person. If the feeling of shame is true for you, you might be saying, "Jesus' healing is for everyone else and not for me."

Finally, the healing you seek could be that you want to have a greater faith. You struggle with doubt or a total lack of belief. You've read the Bible and gone to church, but it just doesn't seem to make sense. You see other Christians and say to yourself, "If that is what being Christian is like, I'm not sure

I want any part of that.” You believe that you’ve prayed and asked for help, but no divine revelation comes. So when you hear this story of Jesus, you’re not sure about him at all.

★ KEY QUESTIONS

- Are you struggling with any of these problems?
- Have you ever talked to another person about your problems?
- Have you been frustrated that no one seemed to understand you, much less been able to help you?
- Have you given up and just decided to live with the problem?
- Would you be willing to try again?

Are You Double-Minded?

I told the story above about the first time I tried to give up pornography. I really did want to be done with it *and* I wanted God to do all of the work. I didn’t want to do anything. In my mind I had a hope that God would literally transform my brain and that I would never have a lustful thought again. I really

wanted to be free and was hoping God would perform a miracle.

That didn't happen. I continued to look at magazines and later videos. When I was sixteen, I went to a Fellowship of Christian Athletes camp, and when one of the professional athletes invited all of us to come forward, I went down front. I was already a Christian, but that day I said to God, "I'll agree to dedicate my life to ministry, and I have two requests. The first is that you will turn me into a professional athlete. That way in my ministry I can witness for Christ. The second request is that you will take away all of my lust." I really thought ministers were not supposed to struggle with anything, much less sexual sin, so it should be a "no brainer" for God to heal me of that. Again, he didn't do it.

The professional-athlete request was not answered either. I really thought, being a tennis player primarily, that I would go on to tennis glory and one day I would win the Wimbledon, the great English tennis tournament. The very next year I was playing in the Illinois State High School Tennis Tournament. I thought I would just "cruise" on to the championship, and then it would just be a matter of time before I was at Wimbledon. In one of the early rounds, a very short and young-looking little "kid" came out on the court to play me. I said, "I'm going to have my way with this kid." Well, this kid turned out to be a very young Jimmy Connors. He beat me handily that day, and it was he who went on to tennis glory and, yes, it was he who would go on to win Wimbledon. This was devastating to me. What later made it worse was that Jimmy Connors went on to

marry a woman who had posed nude in one of the national magazines.

When I got married to my high school sweetheart, Debbie, I believed that marriage would be the answer. Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:1-2, "It is good for a man not to marry. But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife." So I said to myself, "A wife is the answer, and she is supposed to fulfill her 'marital' obligations." But I skipped over mine. As I went off to the honeymoon, I was thinking that I was done with pornography. But even though our sex life was very normal and very satisfying when it happened, I still returned to pornography.

By this time I was pretty angry with God. For ten years at several major events in my life I had been praying and asking God to heal me and he didn't. I was to the point where I just thought that God must not care. In my discouragement, I continued on with lust, and my sexual addiction got worse.

Finally, in 1987 I wound up going to a treatment program for sexual addiction. While I was there, I had to work on some of my issues. I had been depressed for a long time. I was a workaholic too. My relationship and intimacy skills were awful. There were many issues to look at. One day, as I sat outside, I felt the presence of God very dramatically in my life. I felt him telling me, "Mark, I will take care of you, and you will need to learn how to care for yourself." It was Jesus' question, "Are you willing to get well?" It also meant, "Are you willing to work hard at staying sober? And are you willing to work hard on all

of the emotional and spiritual problems you have suffered with for all of these years?”

When sobriety finally was achieved for a long period of time, I began to examine my life. I realized that for all of the past years I had wanted God to do all of the work; I wasn't willing or able to do any of my own work. My basic problem was that I was not willing to tell anyone about my struggle. My shame was so great that I thought if others knew me, including Debbie, they would hate me. I believed if I got honest, I would get kicked out of ministry. So silence was my way of coping with shame.

My anger also needed work. I was angry at God, myself, and Debbie. I blamed many people and all of the sinful sexual stimuli in the world for my problems. I wasn't willing to take responsibility for my own decisions. Then I realized that one of my biggest problems was my own selfishness. There was a big part of me that didn't want to give up pornography. I enjoyed it. It was exciting. Since I worked so hard and was dedicated to the ministry and my marriage, I thought I was entitled to look at a little pornography. “Who was getting hurt?” I asked myself.

Somehow, I knew that God was asking me to join him in my healing. I needed to cooperate and work, take responsibility, examine my anger, learn how to forgive, and—most of all—learn how to get honest with myself and others. Finally, one day after I had been sober for some time, I sat in a church and listened to a sermon on grace. The minister seemed, at one point, to be looking right at me when he said, “You [re-

ally meaning the whole congregation] need to repent of your inability to accept Christ's salvation. Who are you to think that you are so bad, that you are the worst person in the world, and that God doesn't love you?" It was as if Jesus was asking me, through this man, "Mark, do you want to get well? Then cooperate and accept what has been given to you. Learn to know me better. Love others as you love yourself."

What became clear to me is that for years I had a double mind. I was willing to give up pornography as long as God did all the work. Otherwise, I had grown so used to using it as a coping strategy in my life that I wasn't sure what I would do without it. It was as if pornography had become a friend. It was a companion whenever I wanted it to be. It never said no. In my anger, I often thought I deserved to look at it.

James talks about being double-minded in the first chapter of his letter:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. (Vv. 5-8)

You see, I doubted just enough whether or not I wanted to give up my addiction. I was "unstable in all" my ways. James uses the Greek word *dipsuchos* (dip-soo-khos), which literally means "two-spirited," or "double-souled." Notice that *psushos* is the root word used in the English word "psychology," which

is the study of the mind. In Jesus' day, soul and mind were considered the same. So you can be double-minded or double-souled.

Isn't it true that none of us ever do anything we are 100 percent sure about? There is always some doubt, misgiving, or second thought. So when Jesus asks us if we are willing to get well, isn't it true we are never 100 percent willing? We're never completely sure.

There are many men who come to see me for counseling, and they want to get well. There is a change they want to achieve. It is truly amazing how initially zealous they can be, really fired up. Many of them are broken and humble, and they start to get honest. At this point they have a lot of energy to do whatever it takes to get well. For some of them, however, the fire burns out and the total willingness disappears. They become disappointed and discouraged. They get angry at themselves, with God, and perhaps with me. There always was a part of them that didn't want to work that hard to change. They want God, someone else, or their counselors to have all the answers.

A part of the problem is that when these men first come in, they are usually motivated by external factors. They've lost something such as money, time, or a job. They might be in legal trouble. Their wives might be threatening to leave or divorce them. The external fears wear off, however, and now they are left with their internal motivation. Now there is doubt, and double-mindedness sets in. They are tossed to and fro

like the waves of the sea. This is a real emotional and spiritual battle.

My belief is that no one will get well as long as he or she tries to deny this other part of the self. If a person tries to be too perfect and can't ever admit to making mistakes, the discouragement that sets in will defeat that person every time. It's better to embrace the doubts and double-mindedness. It's better to admit there is a part of the mind that really doesn't want to be well and has become used to being sick. Some of us know how to play the role of being sick really well.

✦ KEY QUESTIONS

- Have you ever been initially enthusiastic about something and later been discouraged that your enthusiasm didn't last?
- Have you ever been angry with God for not just automatically healing you?
- Have you ever stopped some behavior because you thought it was destructive and later realized you missed it?
- Are you familiar with doubts?

- Do you sometimes pretend to believe something that you otherwise struggle with?

Finding Willingness

“Okay,” you say, “you’ve convinced me that I have a double mind. Now what do I do?” Good question. I think I could be “clever” and ask, “Are you willing to be willing?” That is really the case. Finding willingness is often a matter of being willing to try something new.

How big of a risk taker are you? Have you ever tried to do something different that you weren’t all that sure about? Maybe you’ve been down on yourself because you think you don’t have any courage. That could be a lie you tell yourself. Did you know that the most difficult physical task any of us will ever learn to do is to walk? You could be a skier, a skater, a dancer, a gymnast, a diver, a bungee jumper, or a great athlete, and doing those things would pale in comparison to learning how to walk. The different muscles involved in walking are many. To learn it you will have to fall down many times. There will have to be others around you encouraging you and holding your hands until you and they are ready to let go.

Do you get the idea? In order to be willing to get well, to cooperate with God’s ability to heal you, to be confident, to live with your doubts and move forward, you must be a risk taker. Somewhere inside you there is an inherent risk taker. How about driving? How many of you were petrified to take that on? You sat behind the wheel and saw the other cars coming

toward you or whizzing past you, and you froze. Something or someone, however, caused you to step on the gas. Walking and driving are analogies. Let me list some things I think about when it comes to a willingness to get well:

- When you have a physical pain or symptom of something wrong in your body, you will need to have the courage to go to a doctor to get diagnosed.
- When you are depressed or anxious, you will need to talk to someone, perhaps even a pastor or counselor.
- When you suffer from an addiction, you will need to admit it to yourself and others.
- When you feel shame, you will need to talk to others and get a second opinion.
- When you have marital difficulties, you will need to ask your spouse if he or she is willing to get some help.
- When you have doubts about your faith, you will need to talk to someone who has faith.

Admitting, confessing, and simply talking are often the courageous first steps in being willing to get well. Silence is the greatest enemy of willingness I know.

If you are willing to do the things listed above, then you will be ready for the second step of willingness—you will be willing to take some action. Here are several examples:

- Your doctor may ask you to take a test, get a procedure, try a drug, or change a lifestyle habit.
- A pastor or counselor may ask you to continue to come and talk about all of your feelings and past experiences.

- A recovering addict who has been sober for a long time will invite you to come to a support group, and you will need to decide to go to one even though you “hate” groups.
- A friend may tell you that you are a beloved child of God and that you are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14), and you will need to choose to believe it.
- Your spouse may be willing to get help, and now you’re going to have to see a counselor and admit to your feelings, perceptions, expectations, and disappointments.
- A pastor or deeply spiritual person may ask you to study the Bible with him or her, go to church, come to a class on faith, or simply meet for coffee to talk more.

These are all basic examples. *Can you see that willingness is often a matter of asking for help?* In our story of the man at the pool, he didn’t ask Jesus for help; Jesus asked him if he was willing. How about you? Are you willing to ask Jesus for help?

One of the most powerful movements in the world over the last seventy-five years has been Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). It began in 1935 by a man named Bill Wilson who had been an alcoholic and who had recently finally stopped drinking. One day on a business trip he was in a strange town and staying in a hotel. As he passed the bar in the hotel, the old temptation to drink began to overtake him. Immediately he found a phone directory of local churches and began to call the pastors. He asked if any of them had an alcoholic in their churches. Every pastor seemed surprised and dumbfounded by the question.

Finally, one of them said, "Oh yes, Dr. Bob Smith, who is one of our members, is widely known as the town drunk."

So Bill went out to Dr. Bob's house. Dr. Bob was alone and had stopped practicing medicine because of his drinking. He was afraid that Bill had come to "preach" at him about the evils of drinking and told him in no uncertain terms to "get lost." Bill was not there to preach, however. He was there because he simply wanted to talk to another drunk. He was not offering to help; he was asking for help. That night, Bill W. and Dr. Bob (as they are known by millions of recovering alcoholics) had the first meeting of AA. Before that meeting, Dr. Bob was not willing to get well. What he needed was someone to demonstrate to him how to ask for help. It was in being a friend, companion, and fellow drunk that he finally (after years of drunkenness) came to his senses and got sober.⁵

Finding willingness, as this story suggests, may simply mean finding others who can model willingness to you. Finding those people may mean asking for help.

KEY QUESTIONS

- What kind of healing do you need? Review all possibilities.
- Do you know anyone who has needed similar healing and who has been successful in finding it?
- Have you ever been able to ask for help?

- Who are the people that specialize in providing help for the kind of problem you have?
- Would you be willing to talk to those people?

Every day in my practice I get calls and emails from people who want to get well. Sometimes those contacts are from the spouse of someone who needs to get well. That spouse is “investigating” the kind of help that is “out there.” Right away I know who is the most likely to get well. You guessed it. It is the person who has asked for help and usually not the person for whom help has been sought.

And when I get that person in my office or in one of my workshops, my first question is still going to be, “Do you want to get well?” That is always the place to start. The men who come to me often say, “I wouldn’t have come [sometimes from all over the world] to you and been willing to pay your fees if I didn’t.” Even with that response I’m going to have to see that willingness demonstrated over time. These men are asking for help, but are they now willing to do whatever it takes, whatever I tell them to do? Getting well is for the long haul, not the quick fix.

Remember also that the Greek word Jesus uses also means “whole” in both body and mind. A willingness to get well from a specific problem, like addiction in my case, will include a willingness to look at the wellness of the soul and mind. Willingness will mean a desire to get well despite all the doubts,

all the work, and all the grief of giving up long-held habits. Willingness will mean trusting God even if you're not always sure God will help.

I remember early on in my healing journey that one of my friends, referring to the counselor he was seeing, said, "If he told me to go stand in the corner on my head because it would help me get well, that is what I'd do." I've never tried that with any of my clients, but I do know that the ones who are willing to ask for help humbly and then trust the guidance of others who have been successful are the ones who will get well.

A willingness to heal means having the courage to move forward, to take risks, to ask for help, to do whatever it takes, and to trust God. Only then will God meet us more than half-way.