

“You’ll never walk again.” Those words echoed in the invalid’s ears for thirty-eight years. Scripture doesn’t reveal how it happened, whether it was a birth defect or genetic condition or freak accident, but the invalid had not stood on his own two feet for nearly four decades.

That’s a long time by any measure, but it must have seemed even longer two thousand years ago when the average life expectancy was twenty-eight years. That average is skewed by infant mortality rates in the ancient world, but even if you lived past your second birthday, the average only rose to forty. This invalid man was way past his prime. In fact, he was living on borrowed time, and I wonder if that’s why Jesus singled him out. That man had been sitting by the pool of Bethesda longer than anyone could remember, but what a way for Jesus to prove that his power knows no logical or chronological limits. It’s never too late when you turn to the One who can turn back time!

The invalid was out of referrals. His condition was incurable and his case was unsolvable. But that’s the Great Physician’s specialty. In the face of every diagnosis the invalid had ever been given, Jesus gives a simple prescription: *Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.*

Have you ever watched a baby try to walk? For parents it’s one of life’s simplest and greatest joys. But it’s not pretty. Watching a baby take his or her first steps is like watching a drunken pirate walk the plank. They weeble and wobble like nobody’s business. In my mind’s eye, that’s how I see this miraculous scene playing out in John’s Gospel. The invalid is no model strutting down the catwalk, no athlete making great strides. This is physical comedy at its finest. The invalid is falling all over himself at first. Those who witnessed it were laughing so hard they were crying; but those tears of laughter turned into tears of joy as they watched this disabled man do something he hadn’t done in decades: jump for joy like a little child.

It doesn’t matter how bad the diagnosis is or how long you’ve had the handicap. It’s never too late to be who you might have been. If you’re breathing, it means God’s not finished with you yet. You are never past your prime. But if you want a second chance, you need to seek a second opinion: God’s opinion.

For thirty-eight years, a handicapped parking permit hung in the invalid’s window. He had a reserved spot at the pool of Bethesda. Day in and day out he begged for money from bathers. It was rare that they made eye contact with him, even rarer that they gave him a handout. But one thing kept him coming back; one thing kept his hopes alive: every once in a blue moon, the waters would be stirred. The cause was undoubtedly the intermittent springs that

fed the pool, but a superstition grew up around the stirring. Some believed that the stirring was caused by angels, and the first one into the water after the water stirred was the winner: healing was the prize.

Like a bad scene from a tragicomedy, hundreds of invalids would creep and crawl and claw their way to the water, hoping they’d be the first one there. But the tragedy was that it wasn’t even true! It didn’t matter whether they were first or last. It was false hope based on a false assumption. And while it’s easy to be dismissive of such silly superstitions, we all know someone who wears their lucky socks on game days, plays the lottery on their birthday, and is very cautious about making plans on Friday the 13th. We all have our pet superstitions. And while those superstitions may seem to invoke the supernatural, they actually revoke it. Anything less than 100% reliance upon the miraculous power of God and God alone actually short-circuits the supernatural. The opposite of belief isn’t unbelief. It’s false belief.

The invalid’s greatest handicap wasn’t physical. His most debilitating handicap was mental: a false assumption that he needed to be the first one into the pool when the water stirred. And we make the same mistake, don’t we? We keep trying what isn’t working. What we need is someone to get in our face and ask us: “How’s that working for you?” If you want God to do a new thing, you can’t keep doing the same old thing. If you want to experience the miraculous, you need to unlearn every assumption, save one: *God is able.*

When Jesus told the invalid to get up and walk, he was asking him to do something he hadn’t done in thirty-eight years, which is what it takes if you want to experience the miraculous. You can’t keep doing what you’ve always done! In fact, you might have to do something you haven’t done in a long, long time. If you want to change, you have to change the equation of your life by adding or subtracting something. You have to do something less, do something more, or do something different.

According to the law of requisite variety, the survival of any system depends on its capacity to cultivate variety in its internal structures. In other words, you have to keep changing. Prolonged equilibrium dulls our senses, numbs our minds, and atrophies our muscles. Your world gets smaller and smaller until your universe is about eight square feet. Equilibrium is bad. Disequilibrium is good.

In the realm of exercise, routines eventually become counterproductive. If you exercise the same muscles the same way every time, your muscles start adapting and stop growing. The

net benefit decreases. What you need to do is disorient them. And the same is true spiritually. Routine is one key to spiritual growth. We call these patterns spiritual disciplines. But when the routine becomes routine, you have to change the routine. If you want to get out of a spiritual slump, you need to change something up. Volunteer at a homeless shelter or a nursing home. Keep a gratitude journal. Take a personal retreat. Pick up a different translation of the Bible. Do a 10-day fruit and vegetable fast like Daniel.

Those small changes in routine can make a radical difference. But it always starts with the first step of faith. The first step is always the longest and hardest, but that one small step often turns into a giant leap.

God is predictably unpredictable. You never know exactly how or when or where God might show up and show off. But you can be sure of this: God will probably ask you to do something unprecedented, unorthodox, and unconventional. And if you have the courage to do something you haven't done in thirty-eight years, you might just experience something you haven't seen in a long, long time.

Prayer: God, I absolutely believe you have the power to heal. You demonstrated that on earth, and you still heal in miraculous ways today. Even when my faith is weak, you say it is enough, and my love for you is strong. And I know you already hold my heart and life in your hands. It's up to you. If I can bring you more glory through healing, then that's what I ask for, that's what I desire. But if your answer is no, or not now, I know that your grace is sufficient for me. Ultimately, I want your will to be my will. I look forward to spending an eternity with you. But Lord, if you have planned still more for me to do here on this earth, I not only need and want your physical healing, Lord, but a thorough, deep-down cleansing and strengthening—a whole-hearted renewal of all that I am. Because all that I am is yours. Use this trial to strengthen me from a "what-if" faith to a "no-matter-what" faith. And no matter what, I choose to honor you and give you glory. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Heavily excerpted from Mark Batterson's The Grave Robber, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2014.

Faith Over Matter

Sunday, March 6, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN 56537

John 5:1-9

In 1939, George Dantzig enrolled as a graduate student at University of California, Berkeley, studying statistics under Polish-born professor Jerzy Neyman. At the beginning of one class session, Dr. Neyman chalked two examples of famously unsolvable problems on the blackboard. George arrived late to class that day, missing the disclaimer. He mistakenly thought the unsolvable problems were their homework assignment, so he transcribed them in his notebook and went to work. It took a little longer than he anticipated, but George ultimately solved both problems. One morning six weeks later, an ecstatic Dr. Neyman knocked on George's front door. A bewildered George actually apologized, thinking the assignment was overdue. That's when Dr. Neyman informed George that he had solved two of statistics' unsolvable problems. Asked about his success, George said: "If someone had told me they were two famous unsolved problems, I probably wouldn't have even tried to solve them."

We make far too many false assumptions about what is and what isn't possible. George Dantzig solved those unsolvable problems because he didn't know it couldn't be done. And therein lies one of the secrets to experiencing the miraculous.

Jesus said, *With God all things are possible* (Matt. 19:26). And just to make sure we don't miss that point, it's inverted in Luke 1:37: *Nothing is impossible with God*. The word *impossible* does not belong in our vocabulary. In God's ears, it's an expletive. And it's the primary reason we don't experience the miraculous. We let our logical assumptions trump our theological beliefs. And before we know it, our reality is defined by human assumptions rather than divine revelation. Experiencing the miraculous is certainly more than the power of positive thinking. "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can" doesn't always get the train up the hill. But, as Henry Ford once said: "Whether you think you can or think you can't – you're right." It's not mind over matter. It's faith over matter. Faith doesn't ignore a doctor's diagnosis. It does, however, seek a second opinion from the Great Physician.

