

PSALM 139 verses 1-18, 23 and 24

¹ You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

⁴ Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,' ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand – when I awake, I am still with you.

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

JOHN chapter 5 verses 1 – 15

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. ² 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. ³ Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralysed. ⁵ One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. ⁶ 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?'

⁷ '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.'

⁸ Then Jesus said to him, 'Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.' ⁹ At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, ¹⁰ and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, 'It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.'

¹¹ But he replied, 'The man who made me well said to me, "Pick up your mat and walk."'

¹² So they asked him, 'Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?'

¹³ The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

¹⁴ Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, 'See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.' ¹⁵ The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

At The Pool Of Bethesda

I've been lying here for another year
feeling left all alone in my great fear.
So perhaps this time? You can never tell
Maybe it is my turn to be made well.

What's all the commotion that I can hear?
and why is this man coming over here?
It looks like He's heading towards my way.
and what is this that I've just heard him say?

'Do you want healing? ', To me He just said
Then 'Arise, walk now and take up your bed.'
Is this true and can it really be
that this great man is going to heal me?

Then entering this poor body of mine
came such wondrous healing from the Divine.
No angel was required, no water stirred
just from this man came the commanding word.

Then limbs for years that were lifeless and dead
became alive at the words that He said.
Then I could stand up to my great delight
and others witnessed the amazing sight.

The leaders said that this should never be.
For it was on the Sabbath He'd healed me
and I did not know the wonderful name
of this great Man who to Bethesda came.

So then I went to the temple to pray
and met Him again I am glad to say.
Then I found out His name and He told me
to stop sinning or much worse things would be.

So back to the leaders I went to tell
that it was Jesus who had made me well.
Why He had healed me, I can't really say
but I'm so glad that he healed me that day.

Royston Allen

(Written after a chat with my bedridden sister Irene.)

“YOU ARE NEVER ALONE 2. God is with you when you are stuck”

READING: *John chapter 5 verses 1 - 15*

David, a young schoolboy, fell over on his way to school one day suffered a two-inch cut on his cheek. In school break he collided with another boy and two of his teeth were knocked loose. At lunch time, while playing football, he fell and broke his wrist.

Later at the hospital, his father noticed David was tightly holding a pound coin in his good hand. "I found it on the ground when I fell," David said. "This is the first pound I ever found. This must be my lucky day."

Despite everything that happened to young David, finding that coin was enough to give him a glimmer of hope on a day when everything worked to do just the opposite. For some, these recent times have seemed pretty hopeless, although many have seen that glimmer of hope with the arrival of vaccines with many people having received their first dose. Many others wait for their turn to arrive. The Bible has many tales of people facing hopeless situations, and of how God came to their deliverance. Perhaps the greatest example is recorded in **Exodus 14** when we read of the Hebrew people escaping from Egypt, led by Moses. After the Egyptian Pharaoh realised what he had done in releasing the slaves, he organised his armies and set out after them. On the banks of the Red Sea, Moses sees the armies coming, the escaping slaves are frightened, there is no way out. The phrase “between the devil and the deep blue sea” comes to mind. But Moses receives a message from God and addresses the people **“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.” (Exodus 14 verses 13 and 14)**. Then the Charlton Heston like figure stretches out his wooden staff, the sea opens, the people cross and as the Egyptians follow in pursuit, the sea closes. Job done. God proves His presence, provides a miracle. Hope restored.

There was a wonderful report on the news of how in the Middle Ages, Christian pilgrims would travel to Lichfield Cathedral in Staffordshire, in the hope of being healed. Now centuries later - hundreds of people are passing through its doors again - this time in search of the vaccine to protect them against coronavirus. Hope offered in the house of God. Today we are going to look at a hopeless situation, how Jesus passed by, and how the man got set for a miracle.

Archaeologists have found that the Pool of Bethesda to be about 165-220 feet wide by 315 foot long, divided by a central partition. The four sides and partition had columns, thus John's "five covered colonnades." There were stairways at the corners that allowed people to get into the pools. The “Sheep Gate”, referred to in **verse 2** of our reading is the one through which sacrificial animals were brought to the Temple. Stephen Gaukroger, in his book “The Word for the World” states that it “is very fitting that Jesus, the Son of God, came to the pool and showed God’s mercy to the lame man.”

There could hardly be a more desperate picture of a more helpless case in the whole Bible. This man had been sitting by the pool for 38 years, half of a long lifetime. Each time the waters were stirred up, the first to get into the water would be healed. This man saw this happen, time after time, helpless to get himself to the waters, and devoid of any help to get him there. He felt abandoned. He could have been constantly awake, waiting for the moment. Constantly frustrated, all hope ebbing away. It was a “dog eat dog” world. Every man for himself.

Sadly, there is something of a reflection of the world we live in today. I should stress that there have been many wonderful stories, over this past year especially, of people going out of their way to help others in our communities who find themselves unable to do for themselves. Some we see being reported on news media, but many goes unnoticed except by the one in receipt of that

kindness. But there are others who, sadly, have no thought of others and look only to their own needs, even if the most vulnerable go without. Much has been reported about allied soldiers held by the Japanese in POW camps during World War II. Forced to live under extreme inhumane conditions, many of them died. Others, however, survived and eventually returned home. The survivors were different in one major respect: they confidently expected to be released someday. They talked about the kinds of homes they would have, the jobs they would choose, and the kind of person they would marry. They drew pictures of their dreams and studied subjects related to the kind of career they would pursue. The hope this gave them, also gave them strength to endure. Researchers have found that an attitude of hope can improve human health, physically, emotionally and mentally. Sadly, too many people overlook the One who can really help them totally, Jesus.

People came from far and near to experience the pool's healing powers. It was not exactly a tourist spot, more like the A&E department of a hospital. But on this particular day, Jesus pays a visit. It is interesting that when Jesus came to Jerusalem, He didn't visit the palaces, but the hospitals. Out of all those around the pool, Jesus singles out this one man. He knew how long the man had been there. Jesus knew his condition. We should be encouraged to know that God knows how long each of us has suffered. Out of all the crowd, Jesus chose this one man. The most helpless and hopeless of all attracts Christ's attention.

Jesus always surprises us. Perhaps we are surprised at just much He cares. David wrote, ***"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8 verses 3-4).*** At the start of our service, we read the Psalmist's record of just how intimately the Creator of ***the Universe knows us each (Psalm 139 verses 1-18).*** ***He has a perfect plan for each of our lives - "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29 verse 11).*** His love for us is unconditional. As David says, ***"He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103 verse 10).***

Once again, Jesus asks a strange question, ***"Do you want to get well?" (John 5 verse 6).*** The man does not answer directly, but begins his excuses for why he has been in the same place for 38 years, blaming others for not getting him into the waters. According to Jewish belief, his illness is the result of his sin – it is his own fault. According to the man, his continuance in this sick state is the fault of others. He can't do it by himself. So when Jesus issues the command to ***"Get up! Pick up your mat and walk!" (John 5 verse 8)*** – Jesus is cutting out the middle man. The great Physician is offering healing and we read that the man at once ***"was cured picked up his mat and walked." (John 5 verse 9).***

The man had been placed where the power of God moved the waters, or so he thought. What he had not realised was that one day, God in flesh would meet with him personally and bring healing. For the man it was not just physical healing, although that was the most evident. It was psychological and emotional healing, restoring all that the previous 38 years had robbed him of, battling with constant disappointment, loneliness, isolation and humiliation. But, for the man, there would also be spiritual healing. How often have we prayed and prayed, trusting that God would hear our prayers, only for it to seem that it drifts off into the blue yonder? How often have we felt small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things, the feeling that no one really cares? How often have we felt that we are left to wallow in our despair? All very human experiences and at some stage in life, we could probably tick those boxes.

However, like the man, have we been in the right place, at the right time, with the right attitude - to experience the great Healer touch our lives, to hear His voice and to be obedient to what He says to do. This man's great symbol of his illness was the mat he lay on. Jesus told him to take it up and go. Time to have hope restored. Our God of all hopefulness is longing to meet us in the place we are stuck. Time to take up our mats and go!