

SUNDAY OF THE PARALYTIC
Tabitha and the Samaritans

May 22, 2016
4th Sunday of Pascha
Revision F

GOSPEL: John 5:1-15
EPISTLE: Acts 9:32-42

Today’s Gospel lesson used to be used in some Western churches a couple generations ago for the 14th Sunday after Trinity (early August). But it is disappearing from use today. Today’s Epistle is not used in the West at all.

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Gospel: John 5:1-15

Coming from Pascha and the Resurrection of Christ, we need to take a look at recurring sin in our lives. Jeremiah had prophesied, “No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord’, for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:34). When did this occur? At our Baptism when Christ “wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us” (Colossians 2:14). We are like the woman caught in the act of adultery. Our accusers have been dispersed and the Lord tells us, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:4-11).

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John Chrysostom stated¹ that our bodily ills are caused by the wickedness of the soul. This is shown both by him that was paralyzed thirty eight years, by him that was let down through the roof, and by Cain also before these. From many other things likewise one may perceive this. Let us do away then with the well-spring of our evils, and all the channels of our diseases will be stopped. The disease is not just physical paralysis, but also our sin. Let us look at these things in more detail.

Introduction

The pool of Bethesda mentioned in the Gospel lesson was 100 yards from the Temple area near the Sheep Gate and was used for washing the sacrificial lambs before they were slain. This means that quite a few sheep got washed in this pool. One thousand sheep passed through this pool per year just from the morning and evening Continual Burnt Offerings, the Sabbath Offering and the first of the month offering (Numbers 28:1-11). At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon offered 120,000 sheep over the course of one week (1 Kings 8:63), and they all were probably washed in this pool of Bethesda. Figuring at least 10,000 sheep per year as an average, the pool of Bethesda may not have been as clean and crystal clear as a Southern California backyard swimming pool. This may explain why the lame and paralyzed were sitting around the pool and not in the pool.

With many sheep passing through the pool of Bethesda, there had to be an organized effort and various captive industries to support it. For example, the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:8-21) when Jesus was born were part of this industry. Their flocks were in the queue for the sacrifices in Jerusalem.

The old city of Jerusalem had an extensive and intricate underground water system that is still being explored today. Extensive tunnels and underground springs existed. Some people have “explained” the stirring of the water of the pool as being caused by the hydraulic effects of intermencencies in the underground springs. The close connection of the pool to the Temple and the Presence of God (in the Holy of Holies) makes the angelic explanation (John 5:4) quite plausible also. One can expect to see a lot of angelic activity in the Presence of God. (Compare John 1:51, Psalm 91:11-12). Others have attributed the “stirring” of the Pool of Bethesda to the Archangel Raphael; for more details, see the Feast Day for Archangels, November 8th.

Jerome stated² that the moving of the waters and the healing of the sick at the pool of Bethesda had to have been the work of the Holy Spirit.

“A man, baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, becomes a temple of the Lord. While the old abode is destroyed a new shrine is built for the Trinity. How can you say that sins can be remitted among the Arians without the coming of the Holy Spirit? How is a soul purged from its former stains, when it doesn’t have the Holy Spirit? It is not mere water which washes the soul, but it is itself first purified by the Spirit that it may be able to spiritually wash the souls of men. ‘The Spirit of the Lord’, says Moses, ‘moved upon the face of the waters’ (Genesis 1:2), from which it appears that there is no baptism

¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XIV, 5.

² Jerome of Bethlehem, “Dialog Against the Luciferians”, 6, in Treatises.

without the Holy Spirit. Bethesda, the pool in Judea, could not cure the limbs of those who suffered from bodily weakness without the appearance of an angel”

Ambrose of Milan stated³ that the waters of the Pool of Bethesda were troubled as a sign for unbelievers.

“The pool of Bethesda was at Jerusalem, in which one was healed every year, but no one was healed before the angel had descended. Because of those who didn’t believe, the water was troubled as a sign that the angel had descended. They had a sign, you have faith; for them an angel descended, for you the Holy Spirit; for them the creation was troubled, for you Christ Himself works, the Lord of the creation.”

Ambrose also stated⁴ that the descent of the angel into the waters of the pool of Bethesda foreshadowed the Holy Spirit at Baptism.

“We read that the Angel descended at the appointed time into the pool of Bethesda and troubled the water; he who first went down into the pool was made well. The Angel foreshadowed in this type the descent of the Holy Spirit, which was to come to pass in our day, and should consecrate the waters when invoked by the prayers of the priest? That Angel, then, was a herald of the Holy Spirit, inasmuch as by means of the grace of the Spirit, medicine was to be applied to our infirmities of soul and mind. The Spirit, then, has the same ministers as God the Father and Christ. He fills all things, possesses all things, works all and in all in the same manner as God the Father and the Son work.”

John Chrysostom concurred⁵ that the angel at the Pool of Bethesda foreshadowed Baptism in the Church.

“What manner of cure is this? What mystery does it signify to us? These things are not written carelessly, or without a purpose, but as by a figure and type they show in outline things to come, in order that what was exceedingly strange might not harm the power of faith by coming unexpectedly. A Baptism was about to be given, possessing much power and the greatest of gifts, purging all sins, and making men alive instead of dead. These things are foreshown by the Pool of Bethesda. Under the old covenant one may see many things done by water on this account. ‘An Angel came down and troubled the water’ (John 5:4), and gave it a healing power, that the Jews might learn that the Lord of Angels could do much more to heal the diseases of the soul. It was not simply the nature of the water that healed, but water joined to the operations of the Angel; so in our case, it is not merely the water that works, but when it has received the grace of the Spirit, then it puts away all our sins.”

Ambrose of Milan stated⁶ that many other aspects of material creation are affected by the moving of the Holy Spirit also. The appearance may be an angel, but the Holy Spirit is directing

³ Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning the Mysteries*, IV, 22.

⁴ Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, I, vii, 88.

Ambrose of Milan, *Concerning the Mysteries*, IV, 22-24.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on John*, XXXVI, 1.

the activities, whether it is the moving of the waters at the Creation or the moving of the waters of the pool of Bethesda.

Tertullian noted⁷ that the angel at the pool of Bethesda was not unusual in the ancient world. Gentiles also claimed a healing power in waters at various places as the devil sought to imitate the power of God.

“The Gentiles ascribe to their idols powers using waters. Washing is the channel through which they are initiated into some sacred rites. The gods are also honored by washings. They baptize people and expiate dwelling places with water; purification with water is a part of their life. We recognize here the zeal of the devil rivaling the things of God, while we find him, too, practicing baptism in his *subjects*. This reveals a contrast: The unclean cleanses; the ruined sets free; the damned absolves! There are other cases, in which unclean spirits brood on waters, in spurious imitation of that hovering of the Divine Spirit in the beginning (Genesis 1:1). We bring up these instances lest any think it too hard to believe that an angel of God should grant his presence to waters, to temper them to man’s salvation, while the evil angel holds frequent profane commerce with the water to man’s ruin. If it seems a novelty for an angel to be present in waters, an angel, by his intervention, periodically stirred the pool at Bethesda. The waters that used to heal bodily defects now heal the spirit; they who used to work temporal salvation, now renew eternal; they who set free just once a year, now save people daily.

Paralyzed for Thirty-Eight Years

After this there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, which is called in Hebrew, Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, waiting for the moving of the water. 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. Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he already had been in that condition a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be made well?” (John 5:1-6)

John Chrysostom stated⁸, “Jesus went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil. By this he shows that many cases of lost senses or paralyzed limbs are the devil’s work and a violent twist given to the body by him”.

Chrysostom also pointed out⁹ how patient, persistent and watchful the paralytic was to wait there for thirty eight years. Jesus noticed this and He sought to heal the paralytic to bring this out.

⁶ Ambrose of Milan, On the Holy Spirit, I, vii, 80; II, v, 33-35; II, vi, 52.

Ambrose of Milan, Concerning the Mysteries, III, 9.

⁷ Tertullian, On Baptism, I, ii, 5.

⁸ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XXIII, vv. 23-24.

⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVI, 1.

“Why did Jesus leave the rest and go to a man who had been paralyzed for thirty eight years? Why did He ask him, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ (John 5:6) Not that He might learn; but that He might show the man’s perseverance, and that we might know that it was on this account that He left the others and came to him. The paralytic responded to Jesus, ‘Yes Lord’, but ‘I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; but while I am coming, another steps down before me’ (John 5:7). It was that we might learn these circumstances that Jesus asked, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ and didn’t say, ‘Do you want Me to heal you?’ Astonishing was the perseverance of the paralytic! He had been paralyzed for thirty eight years, and each year he hoped to be freed from his paralysis; he continued to stay there and didn’t withdraw. Had he not been persistent, would not the past have been sufficient to lead him to give up? Consider how watchful it was likely that the other sick men there would be since the time when the water was troubled was uncertain. The lame and crippled might observe it, but how did the blind see it? Perhaps they learned it from the clamor which arose.”

John Cassian stated¹⁰ that the paralytic was ignorant of who Jesus was, and therefore he was living in unbelief.

“When the paralytic lamented of his lack of human assistance, ‘I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled’ (John 5:7), the Lord in His pity granted pardon to his unbelief and ignorance, and restored him to his former health. Jesus didn’t do it in the way which he expected, but in the way which He Himself willed, saying: ‘Rise, take up your bed and walk’” (John 5:8).

Cyril of Jerusalem stated¹¹ that His body was paralyzed for the sin of the soul; therefore Jesus ministered first to the soul that He might extend the healing to the body. If, therefore, anyone is suffering in soul from sins, there is the Physician for him.

The Hand of God in Punishment for Sin

In our generation, we are uncomfortable speaking of the helpless as being sinful, even if it is truly the case. We are ingrained to show mercy to the less fortunate, and this example cuts against the grain of our thinking. However we need to take a close look at what Jesus really said and what the reality is behind it.

John Chrysostom introduced¹² the subject of punishment for sin in this life by reviewing the punishment for sin that will be a part of the age to come. To remind us of this, God has given us examples of individuals and nations who were punished in this life. If we don’t believe His words, and if we think that it is just idle talk, we can see concrete examples of great suffering and punishment for sin.

“When we see someone sinning, instead of encouraging them on, let us pull them back from the pit of iniquity that we may not have to be punished for

¹⁰ John Cassian, Third Conference of Abbot Chaeremon, II, xiii, 16.

¹¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, X, 13.

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XXV, v. 13.

the ruin of others. Let us keep continually in mind the awesome judgment-seat and the stream of fire (Daniel 7:9-10), the chains never to be loosened and the darkness with no light (Jude 1:6), the gnashing of teeth (Matthew 22:13), and the venomous worm (Mark 9:44). ‘Ah, but God is merciful’! How do we perceive this? Was not that rich man punished for despising Lazarus? Are not the foolish¹³ virgins cast out of the Bride-chamber? (Matthew 25:12) Do not they who did not feed Him go away into ‘the fire prepared for the devil?’ (Matthew 25:41). Will not someone that has dirty garments be ‘bound hand and foot’ (Matthew 22:13), and be taken away? Will, not he that demanded the hundred denarii, be given over to the tormentors? (Matthew 18:28-34) Is not what is said of the adulterers¹⁴ true, that ‘their worm shall not die, nor their fire be quenched?’ (Mark 9:43) Are these mere threats?”

“If we will not believe by hearing the punishments that are to come, at least we can believe by noticing those punishments that have happened already. The things that have already happened surely are not mere threats and words. Who was it that flooded the earth! (Genesis 7) Who was it after this hurled that thunder and lightning on the land of Sodom? (Genesis 19:28) Who drowned the Egyptian army in the sea? (Exodus 14) Who consumed the six hundred thousand men in the wilderness? (Exodus 12:37, Numbers 26:65) Who ordered the earth to open her mouth for the company of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and swallowed them up? (Numbers 16) Who carried off the seventy thousand at one sweep in David’s time? (2 Samuel 24:15) Shall I mention also those that were punished individually? Cain was given up to a continual vengeance! (Genesis 4:12-14) Achan was stoned with his whole family (Joshua 7). A man suffered the same thing for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Numbers 15:32-36). The forty children who mocked Elisha were mauled by those bears, and obtained no pardon even because of their age (2 Kings 2:24). Consider what great suffering the Jews had during the siege of Jerusalem; how the women ate their children, some roasting them, and some consuming them in other ways¹⁵. After being given up to incredible famine, they threw all previous catastrophes into the shade by the exceeding greatness of their own calamities. It was Christ, Who did these things; listen to Him declaring as much clearly and explicitly. In a parable He said, ‘Bring here those enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, and slay them before me’” (Luke 19:27).

Chrysostom continued¹⁶ to note that God doesn’t punish everyone in order to give some an opportunity for repentance. The one being punished may not be the worst sinner; but he might serve as an example to others of a need for repentance. The paralytic by the pool of Bethesda was punished for thirty eight years for his sins; but he finally obtained release from punishment. This is a warning to all of us: the punishments of the age to come have no release.

¹³ The oil that the virgins carried represents deeds of mercy.

¹⁴ That is, looking at a woman to lust after her (Matthew 5:28), and having eyes full of adultery to lead others astray (2 Peter 2:14).

¹⁵ Josephus, Wars of the Jews, VI, iii, 4:201-5:219; Eusebius, Church History, iii, 6.

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, XXV, v. 13.

“We all know what a punishment Ananias and Sapphira suffered for the theft of a few pieces of money (Acts 5:1-10). We notice men that are wasting away with famine, suffering from elephantiasis, maimed in body, living in constant poverty, suffering countless irreparable evils. Is it reasonable for some to be punished, and some not? God is just; we also will assuredly suffer punishment, if we sin. God even here punishes many, that when we don’t believe the words of the threatening, we may at least believe the deeds of vengeance. Since the things of old don’t frighten us so much, by things which happen in every generation, He corrects those in that generation that are growing listless. Why doesn’t He punish everyone here? That He may give the others an interval for repentance. Why doesn’t He just take vengeance on everyone in the next world? If He did, some might not believe in His providence. How many robbers are there who have been caught; how many have left this life unpunished? Where is the mercy of God then? If no one at all had vengeance taken upon him, then we might have taken refuge in this. But now that some are punished, and some are not, though they are worse sinners, how can it be reasonable that there is not the same punishment for the same sins? What reason is there that all are not punished here?”

“Listen to His defense for these things. Those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem? ‘I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish’ (Luke 13:4-5). He exhorts us not to feel confident when others suffer punishment, and we ourselves, though we have committed many transgressions, do not. Unless we change our conduct, we assuredly shall suffer. How is it that we are to be punished without end for short-duration sins here? Those, who in a short moment of time have committed one murder, are condemned to constant punishment in the mines. Some may say, ‘It is not God that does this’. How then did He keep the paralyzed man for thirty eight years in so great punishment? It was for sins that He punished him; listen to what He says, ‘See, you are made well, sin no more’ (John 5:14). The paralytic found a release from his punishment; but the case is not so with the next life. There will never be any release from that; ‘their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched’ (Mark 9:44); also ‘these shall go into everlasting life, but these into everlasting punishment’ (Matthew 25:46). If the life is eternal, the punishment is eternal. Notice how severely He threatened the Jews! Have the things threatened come to pass, or were the things He told them just talk? Jesus said, ‘The days will come in which not *one* stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down’ (Luke 21:6). Have these stones remained on top of each other? No! He said, ‘There shall be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be’ (Matthew 24:21). This has come to pass also! Reading the history of Josephus, we gasp just hearing what they suffered for what they did. I don’t say this to cause us pain, but that I may make us secure; I don’t want to paint a rosy picture lest I should pave a path to worse punishments. We all deserve to be punished for sinning. He has told us beforehand; He has threatened us; He has come to our aid; He has done things without number for our salvation’s sake. He gave us the laver of Regeneration;

He forgave all our former sins; after this forgiveness He gave us the aid of repentance if we sin. He has made the way to forgiveness easy for us. Listen to what He has decreed: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you' (Matthew 6:14). What hardship is there in this? 'If you defend the fatherless, plead for the widow, though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow' (Isaiah 1:17-18). What labor is there here? 'Confess your sins, that you may be justified' (Isaiah 43:26 LXX). What hardship is there in this? 'Atone for your sins by alms' (Daniel 4:24 LXX). What fatigue is there in this? The Publican said, 'God be merciful to me a sinner' and 'went home justified' (Luke 18:13-14). How hard is it to imitate the Publican? Is this enough to persuade us that there is punishment and vengeance? If we aren't convinced by this, we will deny that even the devil is punished. Jesus said, 'depart into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matthew 25:41). If there is no hell, then neither is he punished; but if he is punished, it is plain that we shall be also punished."

Chrysostom also stated¹⁷ that living righteously is the best way to live; but even if we are disciplined by the Lord, it is useful to us. At the very least it will lessen our punishment in the age to come. If we don't understand why some things happen, let us count on the wisdom of God in all things.

"God does not desert someone who is suffering evil; He desires to crown him, and make him more distinguished. If we see a sinner punished, we should remember the paralytic who spent thirty eight years on his bed. That man was delivered over to his paralysis through sin; listen to Christ saying, 'See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you' (John 5:14). We pay the penalty of our sins when we are disciplined. If we live righteously, and suffer for it, we are crowned for doing so. Whether we live in righteousness, or in sin, discipline is a useful thing for us. Sometimes it makes us more distinguished; sometimes it renders us more self-controlled, and lightens our punishment in the age to come. It is possible for someone chastened here, and bearing it thankfully to experience milder punishment there. Listen to Paul, 'For this reason many *are* weak and sick among you, and many sleep. If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are corrected by the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world' (1 Corinthians 11:30-32). If we don't understand some of the events that happen, God is still in control. We can perceive His providence in part; in things incomprehensible let us yield to the unsearchableness of His wisdom. If it is not possible to understand a man's heart if one is not familiar with it, much rather is it impossible for the human understanding to comprehend the infinity of the providence of God. 'How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out!' (Romans 11:33) Nevertheless from small portions we gain a clear faith about the whole, and we give thanks to him for all that happens."

Do You Want to be Made Well?

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homily against Those Who Say that Demons Govern Human Affairs, 8.

Jesus' first remarks to the paralytic of our Gospel lesson are puzzling. The Lord asked him simply, "Do you want to be made well or healthy?" (John 5:6) The man had been there for 38 years waiting for an opportunity to be the first one in the water after the angel stirred it. But every time the stirring occurred, someone else beat him into the water. Since he was laying on a bed as opposed to sitting up, he may have been a quadriplegic as opposed to a paraplegic (i.e. paralyzed from the neck down versus paralyzed from the waist down). In other words, he may not have been able to move at all since he needed "a man to put me into the pool" (John 5:7).

The Lord did not necessarily ask a dumb question, "Do you want to be made well?" Some people prefer to be infirm in some way so that others will take care of them, or so that they can avoid their responsibilities. It's a little like staying home "sick" on the day of a big final exam or on the day of a big confrontation at work.

A Look at the Character of the Paralytic

What was the paralytic like? What can we see about him from John's account?

John Chrysostom had great praise¹⁸ for the paralytic for having struggled bravely for thirty eight years with his paralysis without complaining or blaspheming God for having put him in this condition. He had accepted his condition meekly; in his meekness he had acquired a measure of wisdom.

"We find a treasure in great abundance stored in the soul of the paralytic. It did not contain silver, gold and precious stones, but endurance, philosophy, patience and much hope towards God, which is more valuable than any kind of jewel. You are witnesses who with great zeal drew up drafts of this treasure yet without exhausting it. Such is the nature of spiritual wealth; it resembles fountains of water, or rather exceeds their plenteousness, being most abundant when it has many to draw upon it. For when it enters into any man's soul it is not divided or diminished, but coming in its entirety to each remains continually unconsumed, being incapable of ever failing; which was just what took place at that time."

"The paralytic had been struggling for thirty eight years with an incurable infirmity, yet he did not complain; he did not utter a blasphemous word; he did not accuse his Maker, but endured his calamity bravely and with much meekness. How is this clear? Scripture has not told us anything clearly concerning his former life, only that he had been paralyzed thirty eight years; it doesn't say anything about discontentment, anger or insolence. Yet it has made something plain also. On the approach of Christ, who was a stranger to the paralytic, and he regarded Him as merely a man, he spoke to Him with such great meekness, that we may be able to perceive his former wisdom. Jesus said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?' (John 5:6); he did not make the natural reply: 'You see me who have been lying paralyzed for this long time, and do you ask me if I wish to be made well? Have you come to insult my distress, to rebuke me, to laugh at me and to mock my calamity? He did not say or conceive anything of this kind but

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homily on the Paralytic Let Down through the Roof, 1.

meekly replied¹⁹, ‘Yes Lord’. If after thirty eight years he was meek and gentle, when all the strength of his reasoning faculties was broken down, consider what he is likely to have been at the outset of his trouble. Invalids are easier to please at the beginning of their disorder than they are after a long lapse of time; they become more intolerable when the malady is prolonged. But after so many years, he was so wise, and replied with so much forbearance, it is quite clear that during the previous time also he had been bearing that calamity with much thankfulness.”

The Paralytic Teaches Us about Perseverance

We can all learn some lessons from the paralytic about patience and waiting on God, even after we have sinned and see ourselves worse off for having done what we did. There are things that we can do while we wait that are important and beneficial.

John Chrysostom pointed out²⁰ how diligent the paralytic was in waiting for an opportunity to be healed. On the other hand, we can’t stand to wait even a little while for anything

“Let us be ashamed and groan over our excessive sloth. The paralytic had been waiting for thirty eight years without obtaining what he desired, but he didn’t leave. He had failed not through any carelessness of his own, but through being oppressed and suffering violence from others, who stepped down ahead of him; not even thus did he give up. On the other hand, if we have persisted for ten days to pray for anything and have not obtained it, we are too slothful afterwards to employ the same zeal. We wait on men in this world for so long a time, battling, enduring hardships, performing service, and often at last failing in our expectation. But on our Master, from whom we are sure to obtain a recompense greater than our labors -- for, Paul says, ‘Hope does not disappoint’ (Romans 5:5) -- on Him we can’t stand to wait with due diligence. What chastisement does this deserve! Even if we couldn’t receive anything from Him, shouldn’t we consider that conversing with Him continually is the cause of many blessings? Our reaction is often that continual prayer is hard and we can’t do it!”

Chrysostom also noted²¹ that the paralytic could have easily become despondent over his condition, but instead he was remarkably accepting of his lot. Some people get angry, curse and even despair when some small misfortune comes their way; the paralytic didn’t do this.

“Those who struggle with long poverty or who are nailed to a gruesome disease will receive much comfort from Paul’s words, ‘Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written aforetime for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope’ (Romans 15:4, and 1 Corinthians 10:11). The paralytic by the pool had been paralyzed for thirty eight years, saw others delivered each year, yet he was bound by his condition. Yet not even so did he fall back and despair,

¹⁹ The paralytic is not recorded to have said these exact words, but he implied the equivalent.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVI, 2.

²¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVII, 1.

though not merely despondency for the past, but also hopelessness for the future, was sufficient to overpower him. Listen to what he says, and learn the greatness of his sufferings. Christ had said, ‘Do you want to be made well?’ He replied, ‘Yes, Lord, but I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool’ (John 5:7). What can be more pitiful than these words? What more sad than these circumstances? Do you see a heart crushed through long sickness? Do you see all violence subdued? He uttered no blasphemous word; he didn’t say what we hear many use during bad times. He didn’t curse his birthday; he was not angry at the question. He didn’t say, ‘Have You come to mock us, that You ask whether I desire to be made well?’ But he replied gently, and with great mildness, ‘Yes, Lord’; yet he didn’t know who it was that asked him, nor that He would heal him. But still he mildly relates all the circumstances and asks nothing further, as though he were speaking to a physician, and desired just to tell the story of his sufferings. Perhaps he hoped that Christ might be useful to him as to put him into the water, and desired to attract Him by these words.”

Chrysostom also pointed out²² how understanding the struggle of the paralytic can be a great benefit to us. He was like gold being refined by fire. When the refiner sees that the gold has been sufficiently refined, he removes it from the fire. Similarly, when the Lord sees that our trials have made us better, the trials end.

“His soundness and also his sickness has become a cause of the greatest benefit to us. His cure has stimulated the souls of the listeners to speak the praise of the Lord, and his infirmity has encouraged us to patience, and urged us to match his zeal. It has also exhibited to us the loving kindness of God. The actual deliverance from such a malady, and the protracted duration of his infirmity is a sign of the greatest care for his welfare. A gold refiner casts a piece of gold into the furnace to allow it to be proved by the fire until such time as he sees it has become purer. So God permits the souls of men to be tested by troubles until they become pure and transparent and have reaped much profit from this process of sifting; this is very beneficial.”

“Let us not be disturbed or dismayed, when trials come. If the gold refiner sees how long he ought to leave the piece of gold in the furnace, and when he ought to draw it out, and does not allow it to remain in the fire until it is destroyed and burnt up, much more does God understand this. When He sees that we have become more pure, He releases us from our trials so that we may not be overthrown and cast down by the multiplication of our evils. Let us not complain, or be faint-hearted, when some unexpected thing befalls us; but let us allow Him who knows these things accurately, to prove our hearts by fire as long as He pleases. He does this for a useful purpose and with a view to the profit of those who are tried.”

Chrysostom further stated²³ that some people don’t have a smooth and easy path; but no matter what path we have God is present with us at every step along the path. Just as Satan demanded the opportunity to sift Peter, he demands the opportunity to sift us also. Without the

²² John Chrysostom, Homily on the Paralytic Let Down through the Roof, 1-2

²³ John Chrysostom, Homily on the Paralytic Let Down through the Roof, 2

Lord's help, Peter would have fallen from the Faith when he was being sifted; and so would we. The Lord sees to it that we are not given any trial beyond our strength; but we do need to add our own effort and zeal.

“Let us follow wherever He asks us, and let us not too carefully consider whether He commands us to go by a smooth and easy path, or by a difficult and rugged one, as in the case of this paralytic. It was one species of benefit indeed that his soul should be purged by the long duration of his suffering, being delivered to the fiery trial of affliction as to a kind of furnace. But it was another benefit no less than this that God was present with him in the midst of the trials, and gave him great consolation. He it was who strengthened him, upheld him, stretched forth a hand to him, and didn't allow him to fall. When we hear that it was God Himself, we should not deprive the paralytic of his need of praise, just like any other man who is tried and yet steadfastly endures. Even if we are infinitely wise, even if we are stronger than all men, yet in the absence of His grace we shall not be able to withstand even the most ordinary temptation. Even if one were a Paul, a Peter, a James, or a John, yet if he should be deprived of divine help he would easily be put to shame, overthrown, and laid prostrate. On behalf of these I will read you the words of Christ Himself; He says to Peter, ‘Simon! Satan has asked for you, that he may sift *you* as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail’ (Luke 22:31-32). The meaning of ‘sift’ is to turn and twist, to shake, stir, shatter and worry, which is the process of separating grain from chaff. But Jesus said, ‘I have restrained him’, knowing that you are not able to endure the trial, for the expression ‘that your faith should not fail’ is the utterance of one who signifies that if he had permitted it his faith would have failed. Peter was such a fervent lover of Christ, exposed his life for Him countless times, sprang into the foremost rank in the Apostolic band, was pronounced blessed by his Master, and was called ‘Peter’ on this account because he kept a firm and inflexible hold of the faith. If Peter would have fallen from the Faith if Christ had permitted the devil to try him as much as he desired, what other man will be able to stand apart from His help? Therefore Paul says, ‘God *is* faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*’ (1 Corinthians 10:13). He does not allow a trial to be inflicted beyond our strength; even in that which is proportioned to our strength He is present carrying us through it, if only we ourselves contribute the means at our disposal, such as zeal, hope in Him, thanksgiving, endurance, patience.”

After the Perseverance Ends

After we have struggled with something for a while, we are often delivered from it. Is there anything special that we should do then, besides give thanks? One special thing that would be good to do to remember what we have been through. If we let our deliverance from it serve as a reminder for sin in our life, we will draw closer to God.

John Chrysostom noted²⁴ how Jesus, like a good shepherd, sought out the former paralytic afterward to remind him that his struggle is not over, but that he needs to continually guard his heart. The dread of the last thirty eight years will serve as a reminder about his sin.

“He who comforted the paralytic is the same who permitted the trial to be inflicted on him. Observe after the cure what tenderness He displays. He did not leave him and depart, but having found him in the temple he says ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14). Had He permitted the punishment because He hated him, He would not have released him, He would not have provided for his future safety. The expression ‘lest some worse thing happen to you’ is the utterance of one who would check coming evils beforehand. He put an end to the disease, but did not put an end to the struggle. He expelled the infirmity but did not expel the dread of it, so that the benefit which had been wrought might remain unmoved. This is the part of a tender-hearted physician, not only to put an end to present pains, but to provide for future security, which also Christ did, bracing up his soul by the recollection of past events. Seeing that when the things which distress us have departed, the recollection of them oftentimes departs with them; Christ, wishing it to remain continually, says ‘sin no more lest some worse thing happen to you’”.

Sin No More

Let us look more deeply into what the Lord meant by, “Sin no more”. What does this imply in our lives today? First the Lord asked: “Do you want to be made well?” Later He said: “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you!” (John 5:14) Jesus had also said to another paralytic who lay on a bed, “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you” (Matthew 9:2). At another time Jesus was recorded as using a similar phrase in His final words to the woman caught in the act of adultery by the Scribes and Pharisees: “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:10-11). In the case of the paralytic by the pool, we don’t usually think of a poor helpless cripple as being a sinner, but perhaps there was more to it than that. Everything depended on the condition of his heart which the Lord can see and we can’t.

The “worse thing” that Jesus referred to is illustrated in Luke 11:24-26. There, Jesus described what happens when someone is healed and cleaned out. Once cleaned out, if a man does not have the Holy Spirit guarding his dwelling (i.e., his heart and soul) someone stronger than he (i.e., the demons) will overcome him (Luke 11:21-22). When they do, they will bring with them other demons that are stronger and even more evil such that the last state of the man will be worse than the first.

John Chrysostom pointed out²⁵ that pain or suffering in our physical bodies is often used by God to accomplish some healing in our souls.

“When the soul is diseased we often feel no pain; but if the body receives just a small hurt, we make every exertion to free it from its infirmity, because we feel the infirmity. Therefore God often punishes the body for the transgressions

²⁴ John Chrysostom, Homily on the Paralytic Let Down through the Roof, 2.

²⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 1.

of the soul; by means of the scourging of the inferior part, the better part also may receive some healing. Among the Corinthians Paul restored the adulterer, checking the disease of the soul by the destruction of the flesh (1 Corinthians 5:5). This also Christ did in the case of the paralytic; He showed this when He said, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’” (John 5:14).

What Does “Sin No More” Mean?

We all sin and no one is without sin. We are told to aim to “Be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). But few people actually come close to attaining such a state. The Lord’s words, “Sin no more” seem to be referring to a life of sin and not to one individual shortcoming.

Irenaeus of Lyons stated²⁶ that it is common for men to have infirmities and to be weak because of sin in their lives.

“The Lord plainly revealed Himself and the Father to His disciples, lest they might seek another God besides Him who formed man, and who gave him the breath of life. It is madness to pretend that there is another Father above the Creator. Thus also He healed, by a word, all the others who were in a weak condition because of sin. He said to them, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14), pointing out that, because of the sin of disobedience, infirmities have come upon men. To that man, who had been blind from his birth (John 9:1), He gave sight, not by means of a word, but by an outward action. He did this for a purpose, that He might demonstrate the hand of God, which at the beginning had molded man. Therefore, when His disciples asked Him for what cause the man had been born blind, whether for his own or his parents’ fault, He replied, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him’ (John 9:3). Now the work of God is the fashioning of man.”

Clement of Alexandria outlined²⁷ two aspects of “sin no more”. When we come to the Faith, we receive forgiveness and we are told to “sin no more”. But if we keep falling back into our old life of sin, and need to keep coming back to repentance, we are exhibiting the semblance of repentance and not repentance itself.

“He, who has received the forgiveness of sins, ought to sin no more. In addition to repentance from sins from the heathen life, done in ignorance, there is the repentance which cleanses the seat of the soul from transgressions, that faith may be established. The Lord, foreknowing the future, foresaw both the fickleness of man and the craft and subtlety of the devil from the beginning. Envyng man for the forgiveness of sins, he presents to the servants of God certain causes of sins, skillfully working temptation that they might fall just like he did. Being very merciful, God has granted a second repentance in the case of those who fall into any transgression. Should anyone be tempted after his calling,

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, xv, 2.

²⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, II, 13.

overcome by force and fraud, he may still receive repentance. ‘If we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries’ (Hebrews 10:26-27). But continual and successive repenting for sins is no different from the case of those who have not believed at all, except the unbelievers are not conscious of their sin. I don’t know which of the two is worst, a man who sins knowingly, or one who repents of his sins, and transgresses again. Sin appears in both cases — the sin in the first case is condemned by the worker of the iniquity; in the second case, the man foresees what is about to be done, yet does it anyway. The one gratifies himself in pleasure knowingly; the other, repenting of that in which he gratified himself, by rushing back into pleasure, is near neighbor to him who has sinned willfully.”

“He, then, who from among the Gentiles and from that old life has come to faith, has obtained forgiveness of sins. But the frequent asking of forgiveness, for those same things in which we often transgress, is the semblance of repentance, not repentance itself.”

Cyprian of Carthage stated²⁸ that we need to preserve the temple of our body with an anxious fear. We are both the worshipper and the priest of this temple, and we have begun to be a member of Christ. Because of this, our instruction from our Master is to sin no more.

“In the Scriptures, discipline is prescribed everywhere, and the whole foundation of the Faith proceeds from obedience and fear. When purged from all the filth of the old contagion by the sanctification of the laver of life, our members are God’s temples, and must not be violated or polluted, since he who does violence to them is himself injured. We are the worshippers and priests of those temples; let us obey Him whose members we have already begun to be. Paul tells us, ‘You are not your own, were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body’ (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Let us glorify God in a pure and chaste body, that nothing impure or profane may be brought into the temple of God, lest He should be offended, and abandon the temple which He inhabits. The words of the Lord are, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14). He directs the course of life after He has conferred health, but doesn’t allow us afterwards to wander with free reins. Instead He more severely threatens us if we are again enslaved by those same things that we had been healed from. It is a smaller fault to have sinned before we had known God’s discipline; but there is no further pardon for sinning after you have begun to know God. Let men as well as women, boys as well as girls take care in this respect, that what is received holy and pure from the Lord should be preserved with an anxious fear.”

John Chrysostom noted²⁹ that the paralytic’s condition was caused by his sins, and that his punishment was out of the mercy of God. If we refuse to be corrected by our suffering, we

²⁸ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, II, 2.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 1.

can expect something worse. Some people aren't punished immediately for their sins because they are not correctable, and will have to wait for the age to come for their punishment.

“We learn from the paralytic (1) that his disease had been produced by his sins. (2) We also learn that the accounts of hell fire are real; and also (3) that the punishment is long, even endless. Some might say, ‘If I murdered in just one hour, or if I committed adultery in a little moment of time, why will I be eternally punished?’ The paralytic had not sinned for as many years as he suffered, for he had spent a whole lifetime in the length of his punishment. Sins are not judged by time, but by the nature of the transgressions. Taking this one step further, even though we have suffered severely for former sins, if we afterwards fall into the same, we shall suffer much more severely. He, who is not made better even by punishment, is afterwards led as a despiser to still heavier chastisement. Even in this world when we fall into the same sins after we've been punished, we are chastised yet more severely than before. If we have sinned and we have not been punished at all, shouldn't we then be very anxious, as being about to endure something really bad?”

“Someone might say, ‘Why isn't everyone punished immediately? We see many bad men healthy in body, vigorous, and enjoying great prosperity’. Let us not be confident; let us mourn for them most of all, since their having suffered nothing here, means that they will suffer a severer vengeance hereafter. Paul says, ‘But now that we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world’ (1 Corinthians 11:32); for the punishments here are for warning, there for vengeance. Some might say, ‘Do all diseases come from sin?’ Not all, but most of them; and some proceed from different kinds of loose living, since gluttony, intemperance and sloth produce such like sufferings. The one rule we have to observe is to bear every stroke thankfully; for they are sent because of our sins. Asa, King of Judah was struck with gout in his old age (1 Kings 15:23). They are sent also to make us approved, as the Lord says to Job, ‘Do you think that I have dealt with you in any other way, than that you might appear to be righteous?’” (Job 40:8, LXX)

Chrysostom also stated³⁰ that to have peace means to sin no more and to cease war with God. Acquiring this peace has been done for us by Christ; He also helps us to maintain it.

“What does ‘Let us have peace’ mean? Some say it means, ‘Let us not disagree about bringing in the Law’. But to me Paul seems to be saying, ‘let us sin no more’. Paul set faith before righteousness by works, to prevent anyone from supposing what he said was a ground for listlessness. When he said, ‘let us have peace’, he means, let us sin no more, or go back to our former estate. This would be making war with God. But ‘how is it possible’, one might say, ‘to sin no more?’ When we were liable for so many sins, we were freed from them all. By Christ, much more shall we be able through Him to remain in the estate where we are. It is not the same thing to receive peace when there had been none, versus to keep it when it has been given. To acquire peace surely is harder than to keep it. Yet nevertheless the more difficult has been made easy, and carried into effect.”

³⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Romans, IX, v. 1.

Cyprian of Carthage noted³¹ in the Lord's Prayer that we ask that the Name of God may be holy in us even though we daily fall away. We need daily sanctification in order that we may sin no more.

“In the Lord's Prayer we say, ‘Hallowed be Your name’ (Matthew 6:9); not that we wish that God may be holy by our prayers, but that we ask that His name may be holy in us. By whom is God sanctified, since He Himself sanctifies? Because He says, ‘Be holy, for I the Lord your God *am* holy’ (Leviticus 20:7 LXX), we ask that we who were sanctified in baptism may continue in that which we have begun to be. This we pray for daily; for we have need of daily sanctification that we who daily fall away may wash out our sins by continual sanctification. What the sanctification is, which is conferred on us by the condescension of God, Paul declares, ‘fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, sodomites, thieves, covetous, drunkards, revilers, or extortionists will not inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God’ (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). We pray that this sanctification may remain in us. Because our Lord and Judge warns the man that was healed and quickened by Him to sin no more lest a worse thing happen unto him, we make this supplication in our constant prayers. We ask this day and night, that the sanctification and quickening which is received from the grace of God may be preserved by His protection.”

Gregory the Theologian likened³² Baptism to the woman with a hemorrhage, the paralytic by the pool and Lazarus in the tomb. If we return to our hemorrhage, our paralysis or our death, we may find it impossible to return to health, since a worse thing may happen to us because of the bonds of our own sins.

“Yesterday you were bent over by sin (Luke 13:11); today you have been made straight by the Word. Do not be bent again, and condemned to the earth, as if weighed down by the Devil with a wooden collar, nor get an incurable curvature of the back. Yesterday you were bleeding from an abundant hemorrhage, for you were pouring out crimson sin; today stanching and flourishing again, you have touched the hem of Christ and your issue has been stopped (Matthew 9:20-22). Guard the cleansing lest you should again have a hemorrhage, and not be able to lay hold of Christ to steal salvation; for Christ does not like to be stolen from often, though He is very merciful. Yesterday you were flung on a bed, exhausted and paralyzed, and you had no one to put you into the pool when the water should be troubled. Today you have Him, Who is in one Person God and Man. You were raised up from your bed, and even carried your bed, publicly acknowledging the benefit. Do not again be thrown on your bed by sinning, in the evil of a body paralyzed by its pleasures. As you now are, so walk, mindful of the command, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14), if you prove yourself bad after the blessing you have received. You have heard the loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out’

³¹ Cyprian, Treatises, IV, 12.

³² Gregory Nazianzen, Oration on Holy Baptism, XL, 33.

(John 11:43), as you lay in the tomb; not after four days, but after many days; and you were loosed from the bonds of your grave clothes. Do not again become dead, live with those who dwell in the tombs, or bind yourself with the bonds of your own sins. It is uncertain whether you will rise again from the tomb till the last and universal resurrection; that event will bring every work into judgment, not to be healed, but to be judged, and to give account of all which for good or evil it has treasured up.”

Clement of Alexandria outlined³³ three reasons why God corrects us when we sin: it is not to undo the sin, but that we may sin no more.

“If we are punished for voluntary sins, we are not punished that the sins may be undone, but because they were done. Punishment does not profit him who has sinned, to undo his sin, but that he may sin no more, and that no one else may fall into his sin. Therefore the good God corrects sin for these three reasons”:

1. “That he who is corrected may become better than his former self.”
2. “That those who are capable of being saved by examples may be driven back, being admonished.”
3. “That he who is injured may not be readily despised, and receive further injury.”

John Cassian stated³⁴ that keeping what we have attained as we daily fight for our lives is the main thing that we do as we seek perfection. If we abandon the discipline of the Lord, grace abandons us.

“We are still in the world; we are still placed on the battlefield; we fight daily for our lives. Care must be taken, that after such beginnings as these, an increase should come; what you have begun to be should be consummated in you. It is a small thing to have been able to attain anything; it is more to be able to keep what you have attained. Faith itself and saving birth makes alive, not by being received, but by being preserved. It is not actually the attainment, but the perfecting, that keeps a man for God. The Lord taught this when He said, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14). Think of Him as saying this also to His confessor, ‘Lo you have been made a confessor; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you’. Solomon, Saul, and many others, as long as they walked in the Lord’s ways, they were able to keep the grace given to them. When they abandoned the discipline of the Lord, grace also abandoned them.”

John Chrysostom made³⁵ a play on words between the pool of Bethesda and the Baptismal Font; both do similar things. Sin is our paralysis, but there are many examples where the Baptismal Font cured it.

“To the paralytic Jesus says, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14); but to others, ‘Will you be made well? Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house’ (Matthew 9:6). A dreadful

³³ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 24.

³⁴ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle to Rogatianus the Presbyter, VI, 2.

³⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, LXVII, 4.

paralysis is sin; or rather it is not paralysis only, but also something worse. Such a person is not only inactive regarding good works, but also actively doing evil works. But nevertheless, if you are so inclined, and are willing to rouse yourself a little, all the terrors are at an end.”

“Though you have been this way ‘thirty eight years’, and are eager to become well, there is no one to hinder you. Christ is present now also, and says, ‘Take up your bed’; only be willing to rouse yourself; don’t despair. You may ‘have no man’, but you have God. You may have no one to put you into the pool, but you have Him who allows you not to need the pool. You may have no one to put you in there, but you have Him that commands you to take up your bed.”

“You do not need to say, ‘While I am coming, another steps down before me’ (John 5:7). If it is your will to go down into the fountain, there is no one to hinder you. Grace is not consumed; it is not spent; it is a kind of fountain springing up constantly. By His fullness we are all healed in both soul and body. Let us come to it then now. Rahab was a harlot, yet she was saved (Joshua 2, 6); the thief on a cross was a murderer, yet he became a citizen of Paradise (Luke 23:39-43). Judas was with his Master but perished (John 17:12). Such are the wonderful works of God. Thus the Magi approved themselves (Matthew 2); thus the publican became an evangelist (Matthew 9:9); thus the blasphemer Paul became an apostle” (Acts 9).

John Chrysostom compared³⁶ the healing of the man born blind (John 9) with the healing of the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda. Jesus said that the paralytic was in this condition because of sin; about 18 months later, the Twelve assumed that the man born blind was also, but this is not the case.

“Jesus’ disciples asked Him, ‘Who sinned, this man, or his parents?’ This is a mistaken question, for how could he sin before he was born? How, if his parents had sinned, would he have been punished? Why did they ask this question? When Jesus healed the paralytic, He said, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more’ (John 5:14). They understood that he was paralyzed because of sin; so they said, ‘Well, the other was paralyzed because of his sins; but concerning this man, what would You say? Has he sinned? It is not possible to say so, for he was blind from his birth. Have his parents sinned? Neither can one say this, for the child is not punished for the sins of the father (Deuteronomy 24:16). The disciples spoke, not so much asking for information, as being perplexed.”

Christ Does Not Expose Our Sin Unless We Are Indifferent to It

John Chrysostom stated³⁷ that Jesus’ final words to the former paralytic were not a rebuke but a reminder that the last thirty eight years were the result of sin. Jesus healed him publicly, but He did not expose his sins publicly, just as those who are baptized are not exposed publicly. The only time when Christ exposes our sins is when we become indifferent to them.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LVI, 1.

³⁷ John Chrysostom, Homily on the Paralytic Let Down through the Roof, 3.

“Moreover it is possible to discern Christ’s forethought and consideration not only from this, but also from that which seems to be a rebuke. He did not make a public exposure of his sins, but yet He told him that he suffered what he did on account of his sins. Having reminded him of it, He put him more on the alert against future events. At the same time He made clear to us all his patience, courage and wisdom, having reduced him to the necessity of publicly lamenting his calamity. The paralytic displayed his own earnestness, ‘for while I am coming’, he says, ‘another steps down before me’”.

“Just as we ourselves desire to draw a veil over our sins, so does God much more than we; on this account He cured him in the presence of all, but He gives the exhortation privately. He never makes a public display of our sins, except when He sees men indifferent to them. When He says, ‘you saw me hungry, and fed me not: and thirsty and gave me no drink’ (Matthew 25:42), He speaks in order that we may not hear these words in time to come. He threatens; He exposes us in this world that He may not have to expose us in the next, even as He threatened to overthrow Nineveh for the very reason that He might not overthrow it. This also is what takes place in the case of baptism; He conducts the catechumen to the pool of water without disclosing his sins to anyone. He publicly presents the blessing and makes it clear to all at the font, while the sins of the man are known to no one except God Himself and the man, who receives the forgiveness of them. This also was what took place in the case of this paralytic; He makes the reproof without the presence of witnesses; the utterance is not merely a reproof but also a justification. He proves to the paralytic that it was not without cause and purpose that He had allowed him to be so long afflicted, for He reminded him of his sins, and declared the cause of his infirmity. Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, ‘Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’” (John 5:14).

John Chrysostom stated³⁸ that there are some people who have committed sins too great for repentance. For example Chrysostom mentioned Esau, who Paul called a “profane person, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright”. Later Esau wanted to inherit the blessing of the birthright, but he was rejected even though he sought it diligently with tears (Hebrews 12:16-17). Esau’s tears were not really repentance. He had intended to murder his brother Jacob as soon as the days of mourning the death of his father Isaac were complete (Genesis 27:41). Cain was another example, where the murder of Abel proved that Cain was not repentant for offering a second-rate sacrifice to God. Chrysostom also mentions Zimri and the Midianite prostitute Cozbi, where Zimri and Cozbi were fornicating at midday during a time when God had called the people to repentance (Numbers 25:13-15).

What Are the Worse Things that Can Come?

Afterward Jesus found him in the temple, and said to him, “See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you” (John 5:14)

³⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XXXI, 3.

John Chrysostom pointed out³⁹ what are some of the worse things that result from sin: we become conditioned to it as a habit, and it leaves a kind of venom in our soul.

“Those who are punished here in this life, if they bear it thankfully, may naturally be supposed to eliminate many of their sins. The mischief resulting from sin is twofold: (1) that we offend; (2) that we become worse. This is not the only injury we get from sin, that we commit a sin; but another and a worse one is that our soul receives a habit. This will be plainer when put in the form of a bodily example. He who contracts a fever is harmed not only in this respect, that he is sick, but also after the sickness he becomes weaker, even though he may return to health after a long disease. In the case of sin, though, we may regain health, yet we are far from having the strength we need. Take the case of one who has been insolently abusive; does he not suffer what he deserves for his abusive conduct? Yes, but there is another and a worse thing to regret: his soul has become more conditioned to shame. From each sin that is committed, even after the sin has been done and has ceased, there remains a kind of venom instilled in our souls. Do you ever hear people saying, when they have recovered from sickness, ‘I don’t dare drink water now?’ They have regained their health, yes, but the disease has harmed them by giving them phobias about things that are OK.

John Chrysostom gave⁴⁰ some examples of how the “worse thing” develops through negligence and ingratitude. All our sins are forgiven at our Baptism; but if we return to these sins afterward, we are just asking for a worse punishment by our ingratitude, for we have trampled the Son of God underfoot.

“A man who desires to enter some temporal government, prepares himself all his life, and that he may obtain some dignity, lays out his money, spends his time, and submits to endless troubles. What shall we deserve, who draw near to the kingdom of heaven with such negligence, and both show no earnestness before we have received, and after having received are again negligent? This is the reason why we are negligent after having received, that we did not watch before we had received. Therefore many, after they have received, immediately return to their former vomit, and become more evil, and draw upon themselves a more severe punishment. Having been delivered from their former sins, they have really provoked the Judge, that having been delivered from so great a disease, still they did not learn sobriety. That has happened to them, which Christ threatened to the paralytic, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14). He also predicted this of the Jews, that ‘the last state shall be worse than the first’ (Matthew 12:45). They showed by their ingratitude they should bring upon them the worst of evils, ‘if I had not come, and spoken to them, they had not had sin’ (John 15:22). So that the guilt of sins committed after these benefits is doubled and quadrupled, in that, after the honor put upon us, we show ourselves ungrateful and wicked. The Laver of Baptism does not help to procure for us a milder punishment. Consider: a man has committed serious sins by committing murder or adultery; *these* were remitted through Baptism. There is no sin, no impiety, which is not forgiven by this gift;

³⁹ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XLI, v. 15.

⁴⁰ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, I, 1.

for the Grace is Divine. If a man again commits adultery and murder; the former adultery is indeed done away, the murder forgiven, and not brought up again to his charge, 'for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29). But those committed after Baptism he allows a punishment as great as he would if both the former sins were brought up again, and many worse than these. The guilt is no longer simply equal, but doubled and tripled. Listen to what Paul says: 'He who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?' (Hebrews 10:28-29)

In dealing with the Scribes and Pharisees, Jesus describes one aspect of what can be worse than a thirty-eight-year paralysis. He called them an evil and adulterous generation that doesn't believe; but they still seek a sign – which they wouldn't believe if they saw it. Jesus compared this worse state to demonic possession:

“When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. Then he says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came’. And when he comes, he finds *it* empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last *state* of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation" (Matthew 12:43-45)

John Chrysostom stated⁴¹ that the “worse thing” might be said about us also. After being enlightened, if we cling to our former evil, we will see something worse. If we abuse those who work for us, we need to remember that river of fire that we will need to cross. There will be no one to rescue us when Christ returns on Judgment Day. It will be like those who are condemned to work in the mines, except worse, with demons instead of taskmasters.

“After having been enlightened, and delivered from our former sins, if we again cling to the same wickedness, far more distressing will be the punishment of our subsequent sins. Therefore to the thirty-eight-year paralytic Christ said, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14). What, one might ask, could he possibly suffer worse than this? There is something far worse!”

“Consider many, who like Pharaoh say, ‘I don't know God’, and make those that are in their power cling to the clay and to the bricks (Exodus 5). How many, though God asks them to reduce their ‘threatening’, cannot bear so much as to relax the whip! While we have no Red Sea to cross we do have a river of fire, far greater and fiercer (Daniel 7:10), having its waves of some strange and horrible fire. A great abyss is there, of most intolerable flame, where fire may be seen moving quickly around, like some savage wild beast. If here this material fire leaped like a wild beast out of the furnace, and sprang on those who were outside (Daniel), what will not that other fire do to such as have fallen into it?”

“Listen to Isaiah, ‘The day of the Lord is coming which cannot be escaped, *a day* of wrath and anger’ (Isaiah 13:9 LXX). There will be no one to

⁴¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, XLIII, 5.

rescue; the face of Christ will not be available, so mild and calm. But like those who work in the mines are delivered over to certain cruel men, and see only those who are set over them; so will it be then also, but far more distressing. Here it is possible to go to the king, and beg, and free the condemned person; but there, no longer. He doesn't permit this, but they continue in the scorching torment, in so great anguish, it is not possible for words to tell."

Healing on the Sabbath

This healing of the paralytic had some major repercussions since it was done on the Sabbath (John 5:1, 9). John Chrysostom stated⁴² that the occasion was not just a weekly Sabbath, but the Pentecost Sabbath⁴³. For a more detailed discussion of the Sabbath Laws, see the Gospel lesson for the 10th Sunday of Luke. The Laws concerning the Sabbath were very strict and had teeth in them. For example:

Sabbath Laws	Reference
Complete rest was required	Exodus 23:12; 31:15; 35:2
One could not even kindle a fire (to cook a meal)	Exodus 35:3
No gathering of wood for the day after the Sabbath was allowed	Numbers 15:32-36
This was one of the Ten Commandments	Exodus 20:9-11, Deuteronomy 5:13-15
The death penalty was prescribed for anyone breaking the Sabbath	Exodus 31:15; 35:2

But also tied to the Sabbath observation was a recalling of the time Israel was being “worked to death” in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15). Thus, the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). But it was also a holy day (Exodus 16:23; 20:11; 31:15), and a day of gladness (Numbers 10:10). On this day, the daily offering was doubled (four lambs versus two Numbers 28:3-15) and the showbread was set out in the Holy Place (Leviticus 24:8) before the Lord. The Sabbaths were also to be a sign (or omen) between Israel and God “that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them” (Ezekiel 20:12, 20).

In the true spirit of the Sabbath, Jesus did a number of healings on the Sabbath. For example:

Jesus’ Healings on the Sabbath	Reference
The paralytic (today’s Gospel)	John 5:9
A man with a withered hand	Matthew 12:10; Mark 3:2; Luke 6:7
The man born blind (Gospel for 6 th Sunday of Pascha)	John 9:14
A woman’s hunchback (Gospel for 10 th Sunday of Luke)	Luke 13:14
A man with dropsy	Luke 14:3

When the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for these things -- saying that He was working on the Sabbath -- Jesus replied: that mercy, not sacrifice was to be the spirit of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7, Hosea 6:6).

⁴² John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVI, 1.

Irenaeus of Lyons, Against Heresies, II, xxii, 3 also stated that the occasion was not an ordinary Sabbath but he described it as the First Sabbath of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

⁴³ There is some uncertainty about this. The Orthodox Synaxarion for this Sunday states, “According to the expounders of the Gospels, the Lord Jesus healed this paralytic during the days of the Passover, when He had gone to Jerusalem for the Feast”. Whether it was Pentecost or Passover, it was still a major Feast Day.

After Jesus healed the paralytic, He withdrew (John 5:13). John Chrysostom stated⁴⁴ that this was for two reasons: (1) “While He was absent, the testimony of the man might be unsuspected, for he who now felt himself whole was a credible witness of the benefit. Jesus left the deed to plead its own cause among them that He might not say anything in person respecting Himself, but that the paralytic who had been healed might do so in facing His accusers.” (2) “Jesus did not want the fury of the Jews to be yet more inflamed, for the very sight of one whom they envy tends to kindle not a small spark in malicious persons. The Jewish leaders testify to the miracle, for they didn’t say, ‘Why have you commanded these things to be done on the Sabbath day?’ but, ‘Wherefore do you do these things on the Sabbath day?’ not being displeased at the breaking of the Sabbath, but envious at the restoration of the paralytic.”

Jesus Was Doing the Work of the Father

Following today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus had some discussions with the Jewish leaders where He spoke to them about how He was just doing His Father’s work (John 5:17; 19-47). Therefore, the Jewish leaders had two counts against Him: one for breaking the Sabbath and another for making Himself equal with God (John 5:18). Both were capital offenses under Mosaic Law (Leviticus 24:10-23).

Jesus illustrated this to the former paralytic when He met him in the Temple. John Chrysostom pointed out⁴⁵, “Not only by strengthening the paralytic’s body, but also in another way, He gave a strong proof of His Divinity. By saying, “Sin no more,” He showed that He knew all the transgressions that had formerly been committed by him; and by this He would gain his belief as to the future.”

Chrysostom also stated⁴⁶ that Jesus intentionally brought up His relationship to the Father at this point. He had previously spoken to the Jewish leaders just as a man; now He desired to lead them to a higher train of thought, and to reveal that He is not of a created nature.

“Jesus led up His discourse to something greater, desiring to awe them more by reference to the dignity of the Father, and to lead them up to higher thought. Therefore when He spoke concerning the Sabbath, He didn’t make His defense as man only, or as God only, but sometimes in one way, sometimes in the other. He desired to persuade them both of the condescension of the Dispensation, and the Dignity of His Godhead. Therefore He now defends Himself as God; if He had always spoken with them merely as a man, they would have continued in the same low condition. In order that this may not be the case, He brings forward the Father. Yet creation itself ‘works’ on the Sabbath, for the sun moves, rivers flow, fountains bubble, women bear; but that we may learn that He is not of creation, He didn’t say, ‘Yes, I work, for creation works’, but, ‘Yes, I work, for My Father work’”.

⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVII, 2.

⁴⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 2.

⁴⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 3.

Chrysostom continued to say⁴⁷ that Jesus was clearly declaring Himself absolutely equal to the Father. If Christ's statements had been said one way and understood by the Jewish leaders another way, the Evangelist John would have said so, as he did elsewhere.

“One may see clearly the working of the Father from what Jesus said, for ‘My Father works and I work’ (John 5:17), is the expression of One declaring Himself equal to God. In these words He has marked no difference. He didn’t say, ‘He works and I serve’, but, ‘As He works, so I work’; and has declared absolute equality. If He had not wished to establish this, and the Jews had supposed so without reason, He would not have allowed their minds to be deceived, but would have corrected this. Besides, the Evangelist John would not have been silent on the subject, but would have plainly said that the Jews supposed so, but that Jesus did not make Himself equal to God. In another place John does this very thing, when he perceives that something was said in one way, and understood in another. Jesus said, ‘Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise It up’ (John 2:19), speaking of His Flesh. But the Jews, not understanding this, and supposing that the words were spoken of the Jewish Temple, said, ‘It took forty six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?’ (John 2:20) Since He said one thing, and they imagined another, the Evangelist John corrected their imagination by saying, ‘But He spoke of the Temple of His Body’. If Christ had not made Himself equal with God, had not wished to establish this, and yet the Jews had imagined that He did, John would also have corrected their supposition, and would have said, ‘The Jews thought that He made Himself equal to God, but He wasn’t speaking of equality’. This was done elsewhere also. Christ warned His disciples, ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees’ (Matthew 16:6). They reasoned among themselves, ‘It is because we have taken no bread’; He spoke one thing, calling their doctrine ‘leaven’, but the disciples imagined another, supposing that the words were said of bread. Christ, not the evangelist, then set them right, ‘How is it that you do not understand, that I spoke not to you concerning bread?’” (Matthew 16:8-12)

There are two paradoxes in all this: First, the Jewish leaders had such heartache with Jesus doing good on the Sabbath, when that was what the Sabbath was for. Second, they accused Jesus of blasphemy for (1) claiming to be equal with God (John 5:18; 10:33; 19:7) and (2) forgiving sins which only God can do (Matthew 9:2-3; Luke 5:20-21). Yet they themselves were the real blasphemers when they claimed Jesus cast out demons by the ruler of the demons (Mark 3:20-30; Matthew 12:24-37).

Hilary of Poitiers stated⁴⁸ that the jealousy of the Jewish leaders had been inflamed at Jesus for referring to God as His Father. Therefore they thought He was worthy of death for telling the former paralytic to carry his bed and “break the Sabbath”. Just to assure everyone that He had been born as a man, Jesus also said, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do” (John 5:19).

⁴⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 3.

⁴⁸ Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, VII, 17.

Also Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, XII, 11.

“The chief reason why the Jews wished to kill Jesus was that, in calling God His Father, He had made Himself equal with God. Therefore He put His answer, in which He reproved their evil passion, into the form of an exposition of the whole mystery of our faith. Before this, when He had healed the paralytic, they had passed their judgment on Him saying that He was worthy of death for breaking the Sabbath. He said, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working’ (John 5:17). Their jealousy had been inflamed by Jesus raising Himself to the level of God, by referring to His Father. Now He wishes to assert His birth and to reveal the powers of His nature; so He says, ‘I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do’. These opening words of His reply are aimed at that wicked zeal of the Jews, which hurried them on to want to kill Him. It is in reference to the charge of breaking the Sabbath that He says, ‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working’. He wished them to understand that His practice was justified by Divine authority; He taught them by the same words that His work must be regarded as the work of the Father, Who was working in Him in all that He did. It was to subdue the jealousy awakened by His speaking of God as His Father that He uttered those words, ‘Verily, verily, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do’. Just in case this making of Himself equal to God should withdraw men’s faith from the truth that He had been born, He says that the Son can do nothing but what He sees the Father do.”

Just to show that the healing of the paralytic was no fluke and that He was really God, Jesus continued to say, “The Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does; and He will show Him greater works than these. As the Father raises the dead and gives life to *them*, even so the Son gives life to whom He will.” (John 5:21). From there Jesus went on within a short time to raise Lazarus from being dead for four days.

The Lesson that the Paralytic Teaches Us

There are some details in this Gospel lesson that are worth considering: sin had been the cause of the Paralytic’s condition, for Jesus said, “See, you have been made well (or healthy). Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you” (John 5:14). Earlier, Jesus began by asking the Paralytic, “Do you want to be made whole (or healthy)?” Yet the Paralytic did not even know Who Jesus was (John 5:13), never mind believe that He could perform the miracle. On other occasions, Jesus had asked other recipients of His healing if they believed He could work the cure (Matthew 9:28). In this case, He healed the Paralytic before he exhibited any faith.

Once cured, however, John Chrysostom pointed out⁴⁹ that the former Paralytic showed evidence of a rekindled faith. For example: (1) He immediately got up and walked without mocking, questioning or doubting. (2) He obeyed Jesus in carrying his bed, even though in violation of the Sabbath Laws. (3) When challenged by the Jewish leaders about breaking the Sabbath Laws, he referred to an obviously higher authority, Who told him to do so. (4) In spite of the harassment of the Jewish leaders, the former Paralytic went straight to the Temple, “which is an indication of his great piety. He departed not into the market places, nor gave himself up to

⁴⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 1.

luxury and ease, but remained in the Temple although about to sustain a violent attack and to be harassed by all there.” (5) When he found out⁵⁰ who Jesus was, he proclaimed this to the Jewish leaders, just like the man who was blind from birth did (John 9:11-34).

“That the paralytic believed⁵¹ at first, when no one troubled him, was not so marvelous. However afterwards was different, when the Jews were pressing upon him on all sides, accusing him, ‘It is not lawful for you to take up your bed’. The paralytic paid no attention to their madness, but boldly in the midst of the assembly proclaimed his Benefactor and silenced their shameless tongues, ‘He who made me well said to me, ‘Take up your bed and walk’” (John 5:11). This was an act of great courage! He was all but saying, ‘You are silly and mad who ask me not to take Him for my Teacher who has delivered me from a long and gruesome condition, and not to obey whatever He may command.’”

“The paralytic could have spoken differently, ‘I’m not doing this of my own will, but at the command of another; if you are blaming me for this, blame him who gave the order, and I will set down the bed’. He might have concealed the cure, pretending nothing happened; for he well knew that they were bothered not so much at the breaking of the Sabbath, as at the curing of his condition. Yet he didn’t conceal anything; he didn’t blame Jesus; and he didn’t ask for pardon; but with loud voice he confessed and proclaimed the benefit. Notice how the Jewish leaders acted. They didn’t say, ‘Who is it that has made you whole?’ On this point they were silent; they kept bringing forward the seeming transgression.”

Chrysostom noted the envy of the Jewish leaders and went on to say⁵² that envy disables the eyes of the soul and endangers the salvation of him who is possessed by it. The envious are worse than madmen and demons; even demons don’t attack their fellow demons. If we are commanded to love our enemies, what shall be our lot if we hate our friends? The bottom line is that the envious don’t fight against their brother but with Him whom he serves.

“Let us consider how great an evil is envy, how it disables the eyes of the soul to the endangering of the salvation of him who is possessed by it. As madmen often thrust their swords against their own bodies, so also malicious persons looking only to one thing, the injury of him they envy, care not for their own salvation. Men like these are worse than wild beasts; wild beasts looking for food, or having first been provoked by us, arm themselves against us. But the envious, when they have received kindness, have often repaid their benefactors as though they had wronged them. They are worse than wild beasts and worse than demons; the demons have unceasing hostility against us, but they do not plot against those of their own nature. The envious neither respect their common nature, nor spare their own selves. Why should one be distressed at the prosperity of his neighbor? We ought to be distressed at the evils we suffer, not because we see others doing well. If we are commanded to love our enemies, what punishment shall we suffer if we hate our friends? If he who loves those that love him will be in no better a state than the heathen, what excuse shall he have who injures those that have done him no wrong? Paul says, ‘Though I give my body

⁵⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 2.

⁵¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVII, 2.

⁵² John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVII, 3.

to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing' (1 Corinthians 13:3); now it is clear to everyone that where envy and malice are, love is absent.”

“The envious do not war with their brother, but with Him whom he serves; Him you insult when you prefer your glory to His. What is worst of all is that this sin seems to be an unimportant one, while in fact it is worse than any other. Though you show mercy, watch and fast, you are more accursed than any if you envy your brother. The Corinthian man was once guilty of adultery, yet he was charged with his sin and soon restored to righteousness (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11). Cain envied Abel, but he was not healed; even though God Himself continually counseled him (Genesis 4:5-8), he became more pained and wave-tossed, and was hurried on to murder. Thus envy is worse than murder, and does not easily permit itself to be cured except we pay close attention. Let us tear it up by the roots, considering this, just as we offend God when we waste with envy at other men’s blessings, so when we rejoice with them we are well pleasing to Him, and render ourselves partakers of the good things laid up for the righteous. Paul exhorts us, ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep’ (Romans 12:15), that on either hand we may reap great profit. Even when we don’t labor, by rejoicing with him that labors, we become sharers of his crown. Let us applaud those of our brethren who are well pleasing to God, we may obtain both present and future good things, through the grace of God.”

Chrysostom addressed⁵³ questionings that might arise because of His words to the paralytic:

“‘What then’, says one, ‘do all diseases proceed from sin?’ Not all, but most of them; and some proceed from different kinds of loose living since gluttony, intemperance and sloth produce such like sufferings. But the one rule we have to observe is to bear every stroke thankfully, for they are sent because of our sins.”

Chrysostom also pointed out⁵⁴ that Jesus did not say, “See, you have suffered a sufficient punishment for your sins”; but, “See, you have been made well. Sin no more” (John 5:14). He did not speak to the paralytic after he had suffered the deserved amount of punishment, but that through loving kindness he was made whole. Also, by saying “sin no more”, He revealed His Divinity and showed that He knew all the transgressions that had been formerly committed by him. On the other hand if we don’t suffer punishment though continuing in the same courses, let us use for our charm Paul’s words, “The goodness of God leads us to repentance. But in accordance with our hardness and our impenitent heart we are treasuring up for ourselves wrath in the Day of Wrath” (Romans 2:4-5).

Many people today are in the same condition as the paralytic. We are all paralyzed by sin to varying degrees; but the lesson here is that we should never give up hope. The Lord is aware of our own unique situations. If even the hairs of our head are all numbered (Matthew 10:29-31) and not one of them falls without our Father’s knowledge (Luke 21:16-19), certainly He is aware

⁵³ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 1.

⁵⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXXVIII, 2.

of our infirmities and has allowed them in order to strengthen our faith. It is by our patience that we possess our souls (Luke 21:19; 1 Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1).

Tabitha and the Samaritans

May 22, 2016
4th Sunday of Pascha
Revision D

Epistle: Acts 9:32-42

Today's Epistle lesson is the third in a seven part series describing the development of Christianity after the Resurrection. This Reading is not used in the West.

In our Epistle lesson, we begin with some of Peter's early missionary journeys. He was not far from home here: Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, and the Plain of Sharon (see the map in Figure 1). But later on Peter traveled extensively: Asia Minor, Italy, Egypt, Africa, even Britain, never staying too long in one place.

The setting for the events of this Epistle lesson is the extremely fertile Plain of Sharon. Christ is described as "the rose of Sharon" (Song of Solomon 2:1), which is not the "Rose of Sharon" known in Western culture, but the [Pancratium maritimum](#), which blooms in the late summer just above the high-tide mark along the Mediterranean shore in Israel. It is also called sand daffodil or sand lily, and creates a beautiful display along the sea shore. At the Eastern side of the Plain of Sharon, due East of Joppa (not shown in Figure 1), is the traditional site for the city of Arimathea, home of Joseph of Arimathea, who performed the burial rite for Jesus (John 19:38-42)

The date of the Epistle lesson is sometime between 31 AD (the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7) and 44 AD (the famine in the days of Claudius and the martyrdom of James Zebedee in Acts 11:28; 12:2). During this period, the Apostle Paul was converted c. 34 AD (Acts 9:1-18), went to Arabia (Galatians 1:17), returned to Jerusalem three years later c. 37 AD (Galatians 1:18), and finally was sent to Tarsus (Acts 9:30). With Paul the Jewish zealot pacified, "the churches throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and were edified" (Acts 9:31). Thus, the setting for the Epistle lesson must be the mid to late 30's AD. For more discussion of these dates, see the Epistle lesson for the 20th Sunday after Pentecost (Galatians 1:11-19).

As Peter traveled around, he healed the paralytic Aeneas, telling him to take up his bed and walk, just like the Lord had told the paralytic by the pool of Bethesda in today's Gospel lesson. This happened in Lydda, which is at the Southern end of the 50 mile long Plain of Sharon. Thus the Twelve, the foundation of the Church and ultimately the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:14), have begun acting in the place of the Lord at the direction of the Head of the Body.

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The Healing of Aeneas

Aeneas may have been well known, because people from considerable distances came to see Peter and turned to the Lord (Acts 9:35). Since the Plain of Sharon is located in Samaria, many of these new converts may have been Gentiles, thus setting up the “Gentile Pentecost” of Acts 10 in Caesarea at the Northern end of the Plain of Sharon.

John Chrysostom noted⁵⁵ that Peter did not speak to Aeneas in his own name but in the Name of Christ.

“When Peter healed Aeneas, he said, ‘Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed’ (Acts 9:34). He did not speak in his own name, but in the Name of Christ. But ‘rise’ is a command. On the other hand, it is an instance of confidence in one’s right, not an arrogant claim to power; and the command had authority because of the effective influence of the Name, not because of its own might.”

Similarly Paul said to the spirit of python (Greek *pneuma puthona*), ‘I charge you in the Name of Jesus Christ come out of her’ (Acts 16:16), and the demon came out of her. Even the Jewish exorcists used the Name of Jesus Christ⁵⁶ to cast out some demons (Acts 19:13-16), until they met a stronger demon who challenged their unbelief.

John Chrysostom noted⁵⁷ that the circumstances of the healing of Aeneas were similar to that of the Paralytic in the Gospel lesson. Peter did not wait for an expression of faith on the part of Aeneas just as the Lord did not wait with the Paralytic. And the results were similar: the miracle served as an exhortation to many. “So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord” (Acts 9:35).

The Raising of Tabitha

In our Epistle lesson, while Peter was in Lydda after healing Aeneas, Tabitha died in Joppa. The disciples in Joppa therefore sent two men to get Peter in nearby Lydda. When Peter arrived, he again imitated His Master in raising Tabitha as he had in healing Aeneas. Peter remembered how the Lord had raised Jairus’ daughter: first He had everybody leave the room except Jairus, his wife and Peter, James and John. With the tumult, commotion and ridicule outside, Jesus taught Peter to seek the Lord in the quietness of prayer (Mark 5:37-42). In our Epistle lesson, Peter did the same thing (Acts 9:40-41) after putting all the weeping widows out of the room.

The Benefit of Tabitha’s Work with the Poor

⁵⁵ Ambrose of Milan, Exposition of the Christian Faith, III, iv, 31.

⁵⁶ There are many other references to the use of the Name of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. See for example Acts 3:6; 4:10, 18, 30; 8:12-16; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 10; 5:4; 6:11; Philippians 2:10; Colossians 3:17.

⁵⁷ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XXI, vv. 26-27.

Paul stated, “Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (Galatians 6:7-8). We tend to think of these words more along the lines of sowing to the flesh; but the words apply equally to sowing to the Spirit. Tabitha sowed to the Spirit considerably in making clothes for the poor; and it benefitted her a great deal.

Cyprian of Carthage pointed out⁵⁸ a strong link between almsgiving and the mercy of God; the more mercy we show, the more we receive. This was illustrated in the raising of Tabitha due to her long record of almsgiving in making clothing for the poor widows.

“God has taught sinners what to do; by works of righteousness God is satisfied, and sins are cleansed by works of mercy. Solomon said, ‘Lay up your treasure according to the commandments of the Most High, and it will profit you more than gold. Store up almsgiving in your storerooms, and it will rescue you from all affliction; more than a mighty shield and more than a heavy spear, almsgiving will fight on your behalf against your enemy’ (Ecclesiasticus 29:11-13 LXX). Again: ‘Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard’ (Proverbs 21:13). He shall not be able to deserve the mercy of the Lord, who himself shall not have been merciful; nor shall he obtain anything from divine pity in his prayers, who shall not have been humane towards the poor man’s prayer. The Holy Spirit declares this, ‘Blessed is he who considers the poor; The Lord will deliver him in time of trouble’ (Psalm 41:1). When king Nebuchadnezzar was anxious, being frightened by an adverse dream, Daniel gave him a remedy to obtain divine help for the turning away of evil. ‘Therefore, O king, let my counsel please you and atone for your sins by alms, and your iniquities by compassion on the poor; perhaps God will be long-suffering to your trespasses’ (Daniel 4:27 LXX). Since the king did not obey him, he underwent the misfortunes which he had seen, and which he might have escaped had he redeemed his sins by almsgiving. Raphael the archangel says, ‘Prayer is good when accompanied by fasting, almsgiving, and righteousness. A few prayers with righteousness are better than much with wrongdoing. It is better to give alms than to treasure up gold. Almsgiving rescues one from death and it will wash away every sin. Those who perform almsgiving and are righteous will be full of life’ (Tobit 12:8-9 LXX). He shows that our prayers and fasting are less helpful, unless they are aided by almsgiving; that entreaties alone are of little force to obtain what they seek, unless they are filled up with deeds and good works. The angel reveals that our petitions become effective by almsgiving, that life is redeemed from dangers by almsgiving and that souls are delivered from death by almsgiving.”

“We are bringing forward these things so that we might prove what Raphael the angel said. Souls are delivered by almsgiving not only from the second, but from the first death. When Tabitha, being greatly given to good works and to bestowing alms, fell sick and died, Peter was summoned to her lifeless body. When he had come in haste, there stood around him widows weeping and begging, showing the cloaks, and coats, and all the garments which they had received, and praying for the deceased not by their words, but by her

⁵⁸ Cyprian of Carthage, Treatises, VIII, 5-6.

own deeds. Peter felt that what was asked might be obtained, and that Christ's aid would not be lacking to the petitioners; He Himself was clothed in the clothing of the widows. Falling on his knees, he prayed, as a fit advocate for the widows and poor. He brought to the Lord the prayers entrusted to him, and turning to the body, he said, 'Tabitha, in the name of Jesus Christ, arise!' (Acts 9:40) Therefore death is suspended, and the spirit is restored; so effectual were the merits of mercy, so much did righteous works help! She who had conferred the help needful to live on suffering widows, deserved to be recalled to life by the widows' petition."

John Chrysostom stated⁵⁹ that we can imitate by including the poor in our wills when we depart this life. In so doing, we are in essence leaving some of our possessions to Christ Himself in feeding and clothing the least of His brethren (Matthew 25:34-40).

"What excuse can we have, when we adorn a body, which is consumed by corruption and worms, and neglect Christ when thirsting, going about naked, and a stranger? Let us perform the funeral services for the departed, as is good both for us and them, to the glory of God. Let us give alms for their sake; let us send with them the best provision for the way. The memory of admirable men, though dead, has protected the living. God said, 'I will defend this city, to save it For My own sake and for My servant David's sake' (2 Kings 19:34); much more will alms-doing effect this. This has even raised the dead, as when the widows stood around showing what things Tabitha had made, while she was with them (Acts 9:39). Therefore when one is about to die, let the friend of that dying person prepare the funeral, and persuade the departing one to leave something to the needy. With these garments of compassion let him be sent to the grave, leaving Christ as his heir. If those who write kings among their heirs leave a safe portion to their relations, when one leaves Christ as heir with his children, consider how great good he will draw down upon himself. These are the right sort of funerals; these profit both those who remain and those who depart. If we are buried like this, we shall be glorious at the Resurrection. But if caring for the body we neglect the soul, we then shall suffer many terrible things, and incur much ridicule. It is a good thing to depart being clothed with virtue. Let us wrap this around us; it is best to do so during all our lifetime; but if we have in this life been negligent, let us at least in our end be sober, and charge our relations to help us when we depart by alms-doing. In this way we can assist each other to attain confidence at Judgment Day."

Chrysostom also stated⁶⁰ that not everyone has the opportunity in martyrdom to offer their body to be burned in the fire (1 Corinthians 13:3). But we all can do the equivalent by living in voluntary poverty instead of in luxury and free spending. When the love of wealth possesses us, it is a trap (1 Timothy 6:10); but the fire of voluntary poverty is an acceptable offering to God. Tabitha had been doing this for a long time, making clothing for the poor. These poor widows were now the ones begging Peter to help Tabitha out – and God heard their pleas.

⁵⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXV, 6.

⁶⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XI, 6-7.

“Such were the offerings of Cornelius. ‘His prayers and his alms came up for a memorial before God’ (Acts 10:4). This was a most excellent combination. Then we are heard, when we ourselves also hear the poor who come to us. ‘He that stops his ears from hearing the poor, himself also shall cry, and there shall be none to hear him’ (Proverbs 21:13 LXX); God will not listen to him. ‘Blessed is the man that considers the poor and needy: the Lord will deliver him in the evil day’ (Psalm 41:1 LXX). But what day is evil except that one which is evil to sinners?”

“What is meant by the words, ‘He that considers the poor’? He understands what it is to be a poor man; he that has thoroughly learned his affliction will certainly have compassion on him. When we see a poor man, we should not hurry by, but we should immediately reflect what we would have been, if we had been he. What would we have wished that people should do for us? Reflect that he is a free-man like us, shares the same noble birth with us, and possesses all things in common with us; and yet often he is not even on the same level as our dogs. While our dogs are satiated, he often goes to sleep hungry.”

“The poor man performs necessary services for us that are far greater than dogs or servants. He will stand by us in the Day of Judgment, and will deliver us from the fire. Our servants don’t do this! When Tabitha died, who raised her up? It was not the servants who stood around, but the poor who begged Peter! The frost is hard to bear, and the poor man is an outcast in rags, near dead, with his teeth chattering. By his looks and his demeanor, he is fit to move us. If we pass by, warm and well-fed; how do we expect God to deliver us when we are in misfortune? Sometimes we say, ‘If it had been me, and I had found one that had done many wrong things, I would have forgiven him; does not God forgive me?’ Don’t say this; this is not the point. He that has done us no wrong, whom we are able to deliver, him we neglect. How shall He forgive us, who are sinning against Him? Is not this deserving of hell? How amazing! Often we adorn a dead body for burial with nice clothing, even inlaid with gold; while that which is in pain, lamenting, tormented, racked by hunger and frost, we neglect; in doing so, we give more to vainglory than to the fear of God.”

Raising the Dead is Easier than Converting the Soul

John Chrysostom put⁶¹ the raising of Tabitha in perspective: it is easier to do this than to influence peoples’ choice to become Christians. We may think that this is strange to say, since we see people becoming Christians all the time, but rarely do we see the dead rise. The point is to understand “the hope of His calling” and “the riches of the glory of His inheritance”. This implies more than nominal Christianity, and going to Church once in a while.

“Paul encouraged us to have, ‘the eyes of our understanding enlightened’ (Ephesians 1:18). He who has learned what God is will have no misgiving about His promises, and no disbelief about what has been already brought to pass. He prays that there may be given them ‘a spirit of wisdom and revelation’ (Ephesians 1:17). Yet still he also establishes it, as far as he can himself, by arguments, and from already existing facts. Paul was about to mention some things which had

⁶¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, III, vv. 21-22.

already come to pass, and others which had not as yet happened; he makes those which have been brought to pass, a pledge of those which have not. For example, Paul said, 'That you may know what the hope of His calling is'. It is as yet hidden, but not so to the faithful. Again, 'what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints' (Ephesians 1:18). This too is as yet hidden."

"But what is clear? Through His power, we have believed that He has raised Christ. To persuade souls, is a thing far more miraculous than to raise a dead body. I will try to make this clear. Christ said to the dead, 'Lazarus, come out' (John 11:43), and immediately he obeyed. Peter said, 'Tabitha, arise' (Acts 9:40), and she did not refuse. He Himself shall speak the word at the last day, and all shall rise quickly, that 'we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep' (1 Thessalonians 4:15). All shall come to pass; all shall run together 'in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet' (1 Corinthians 15:52). But in the matter of believing, it is not so. Listen to Him again, 'How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!' (Matthew 23:37) You perceive that this last is the more difficult. Accordingly, it is upon this that he builds up the whole argument; by human calculations it is far more difficult to influence peoples' choice, than to work upon nature. The reason is because He wants us to become good of our own free will. Thus with good reason does he say, 'The exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe'" (Ephesians 1:19).

Other Events in Samaria about This Time

This was not the first time Peter had been to Samaria. He and John had been sent to Samaria earlier by James (and the Apostles in Jerusalem) in response to the preaching of Deacon Philip in c. 32-33 AD (Acts 8:14). On their return to Jerusalem, Peter and John had preached in many Samaritan villages (Acts 8:25). However, Deacon Philip's preaching took place in the city of Samaria (or Sebaste), which is about 15 miles East of the Plain of Sharon. Peter and John had laid hands on Deacon Philip's converts then such that they received the Holy Spirit in what is sometimes called "The Samaritan Pentecost" (Acts 8:17); today we call this receiving of the Holy Spirit "chrismation." Most of these people were probably "half-Jews" as Samaritans were called.

Peter stayed quite a while in Joppa (Acts 9:43) as a result of the large number of converts from the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Tabitha (9:36-42).

Another prominent resident of Lydda around this time was Joseph of Arimathea. After he and Nicodemus, both members of the Sanhedrin, performed the burial service for Jesus, they became persona-non-grata in Jerusalem and had to leave town. Joseph settled in Lydda and helped start the church there before going to Gaul and Britain. Later bishops of Lydda were Amplias and Zenas who worked with the Apostle Paul (Romans 16:8; Titus 3:13) and who were two of the original members of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-17).

Next week we will pick this up again with Photini, the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well in Sychar, and with the men from Cyprus and Cyrene who started preaching to Gentiles in Antioch.

Prayers for the Dead

Regarding Tabitha, besides comparing her to Jairus' daughter, Chrysostom notes⁶² the faith of the disciples in Joppa. Why did they wait until she was dead? Why wasn't Peter solicited earlier? So right-minded were they, they did not think it proper to trouble the disciples about such matters and to take them away from the preaching.

Chrysostom went off⁶³ on a bit of a tangent in commenting on this. He began with how inappropriate the tears were in Joppa.

“If the Emperor were to invite one of us to the palace, would it be right, I ask, to weep and mourn? Angels are present, commissioned from heaven, sent from the King Himself to call their fellow servant (Tabitha); and do you weep? Do you not know what a mystery it is that is taking place, how awesome, how dread, and worthy of hymns and praise?...Like the spectacle of the Emperor as he comes in state to take possession of the city is the soul having left the body and departing in company with angels. Think what the soul must then be! In what amazement, what wonder, what delight! Why do you mourn?”

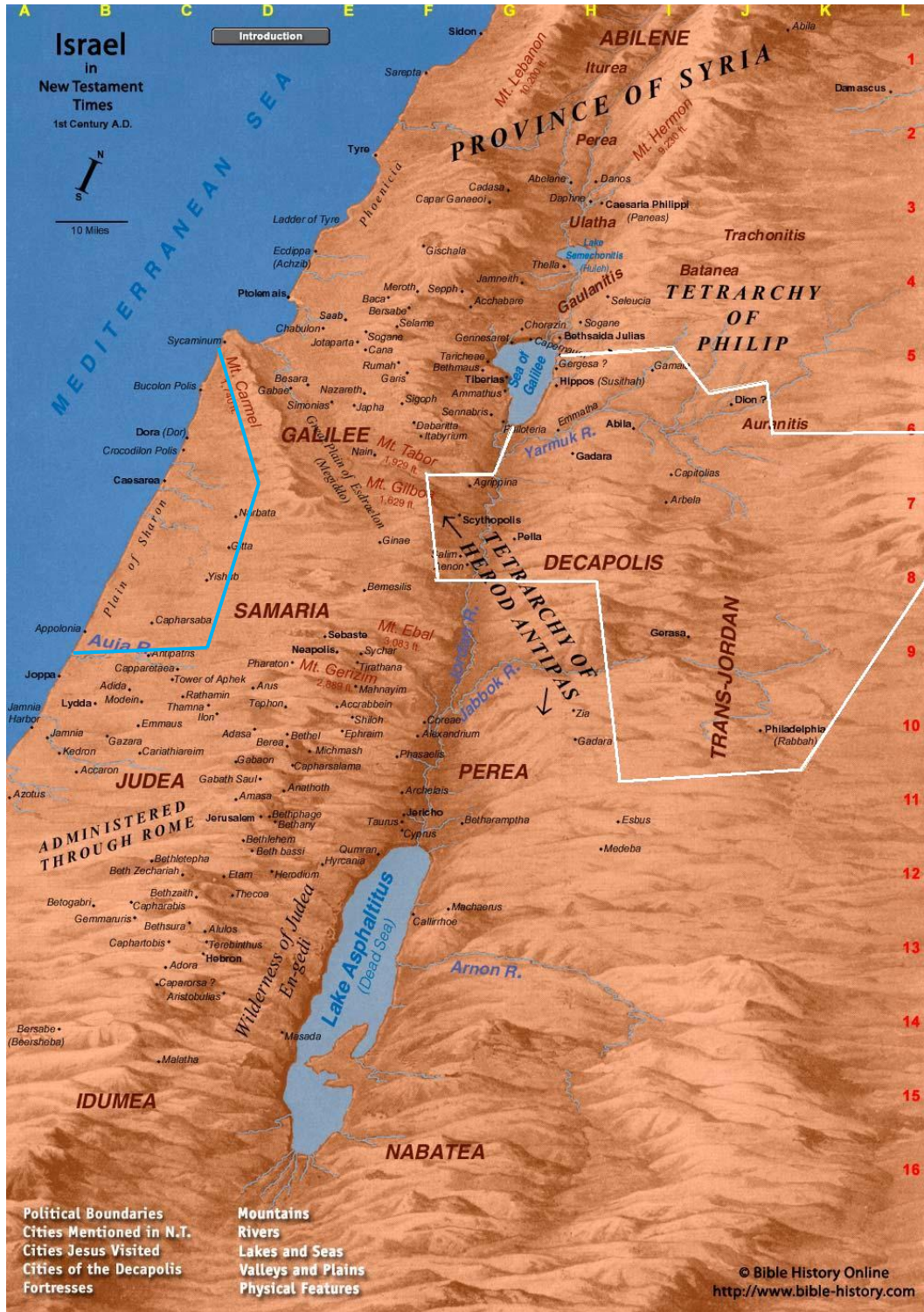
On the other hand, given “a man who has lost all the labor of a whole life: not one day has he lived for himself, but only to luxury, to debauchery, to covetousness, to sin, to the devil. Shall we not bewail this man? Shall we not try to snatch him from his perils? For it is, yes, it is possible, if we will, to mitigate his punishment, if we make continual prayers for him; if for him we give alms. Has he no alms-deeds of his own to exhibit? Let him have at least those of his kindred, which are done for him. The more sins he has to answer for, the greater need he has of alms; not only for this reason, but because the alms have not the same virtue now, but far less. For it is not all the same to have done it himself, and to have another do it for him. Even this pertains to the mercy of God: widows (like the widows in Joppa) standing around and weeping know how to rescue, not indeed from the present death, but from that which is to come. Many have profited even by the alms done by others on their behalf.

Something we often overlook is Jesus' reply to the Sadducees when they tested Him regarding the Resurrection. Quoting a very much used passage from the Old Testament, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”, He said, God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matthew 22:32). When He said this, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been “dead” c. 1800 years. If they're not really “dead”, but living somewhere, it behooves us to get in touch with the abode where they are and see things from their point of view.

⁶² John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XXI, vv. 36-37.

⁶³ John Chrysostom, Commentary on Acts, XXI, v. 42.

Figure 1
Map of Decapolis (white) and Sharon (blue)⁶⁴



⁶⁴ © Bible History Online <http://www.bible-history.com>