

# GOD AND THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE

By Rev. Howard Chang, DMin



## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Psoriasis, an immune-mediated disease that affects the skin and joints, first broke out when I was eight years old. I came to experience the red, itchy, burning, and sometimes bleeding lesions that would cover at least some part of my body for decades to come.

The dermatologist near my home in the Bay Area sought confirmation of my diagnosis from the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) Psoriasis Treatment Center. On my visit to UCSF, the professor of dermatology presented my case to a large crowd of medical students and residents.

I don't remember what he taught as I stood next to him with my skin exposed, but I distinctly remember how I felt—like a caged animal in the zoo that everyone curiously stares at. My dad told me years later that the dermatologist said sorry about my psoriasis diagnosis and that it would be a lifelong battle.

When I became a Christian as a teen, I scoured the Bible for answers to the tough questions of why I had psoriasis. The Scriptures didn't provide the exact reasons but God's response to the Apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh helped to quell my restless thoughts: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor. 12:9a).

By God's providence, my growing relationship with Jesus informed and transformed my journey as a patient. I first shared my psoriasis story at an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship large group meeting at the University of California, Davis (UCD) during my second year of college. Fellow students appreciated my vulnerability and how my faith brought spiritual understanding and emotional healing. Many expressed how they identified with parts of my story in their own lives.

In 2007 I began health blogging to share my experience living with psoriasis. Writing gave me an outlet to process the emotional and spiritual trauma sustained since childhood. I became a health advocate and "patient expert" collaborating with pharmaceutical companies and non-profit health advocacy groups while continuing to publish blogs.

---

<sup>1</sup> Illustrations by Lydia Chang; Bible references from the *New International Version Bible (NIV)*, 2011, <https://www.biblegateway.com>.

Today I still hear those words of God's sufficiency spoken to the Apostle Paul in response to his prayers to have a thorn in his flesh removed. I relate to other Bible characters in similar ways as they encountered God with their physical ailments. I continue to pursue God with difficult questions and share my health story openly.

The following Bible studies connect the patient experience with the Triune God. The same Father God who sustained the Apostle Paul lives today. Jesus sees each person living with physical ailment or disability as an individual, not an annoyance. He sees their true need. The Holy Spirit speaks truth to God's children when they don't even know how to pray. God in all his fullness desires to bring hope, healing, and redemption to all.

How to Use this Study: The God and the Patient Experience Bible studies are designed for individual or small groups. In group settings, the Scripture can be read out loud by an individual or together in unison. The Reflection can be read individually or as a group before engaging the Opener question in pairs or as a group.

If time is limited, the group can choose which Discussion questions to address. Put It into Practice is a project that can be discussed at a subsequent gathering. The leader can guide the Closing Prayer for the group or individuals can engage in the prayer silently.

## ISOLATION

### *Finding Solitude with God*



#### Scripture Reading: Job 2:7-13

<sup>7</sup> So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. <sup>8</sup> Then Job took a piece of broken pottery and scraped himself with it as he sat among the ashes. <sup>9</sup> His wife said to him, "Are you still maintaining your integrity? Curse God and die!"

<sup>10</sup> He replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"

*In all this, Job did not sin in what he said.*

<sup>11</sup> When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. <sup>12</sup> When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. <sup>13</sup> Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

#### Reflection

I've heard it over and over again from those living with psoriasis: *I feel so alone*. Today, social media allows people of different backgrounds and geographies to connect in ways I never could as a young person. I didn't meet another person with psoriasis until after high school graduation.

Yet, even with the Internet, feelings of isolation and loneliness can persist. It's natural to want to isolate for fear of judgment or unsolicited advice. Each person's journey is theirs alone. It can be difficult for even friends and family to truly know how you are feeling when diagnosed with a new health condition.

Job discovered this when he was afflicted by painful sores on his body from head to toe. His wife hardly supported him as he desperately tried to maintain his faith and integrity. His three friends made the effort to see and comfort him, but they didn't know what to say for an entire week. Their presence may have only magnified the loneliness Job already felt. He was like a person with a secret in a crowd of acquaintances. When his friends finally spoke, they poured out judgment and misunderstanding on Job.

Solitude is an altogether different experience amid difficult and challenging situations. Like the proverbial calm in the eye of the hurricane, a believer turning in faith to God finds a peace that passes all understanding. As the Good Shepherd knows each sheep by name, God knows all that I am facing and what I need to make it through.

### Opener

Think of a time when you felt alone in a difficulty, even while surrounded by others. What is one word that describes your experience?

### Discussion Questions

- What clues do you observe about Job's state of mind and how he felt during his time of affliction?
- How did the reaction of Job's wife and friends impact his faith in God? What does it mean that Job did not sin in what he said (v. 10)?
- A question that can come to the surface in isolating situations is "why"? Imagining you are Job in this story, what is one *why* question you might ask of God or others?
- What are some ways you or others have responded to someone who is enduring an acute health crisis or chronic health condition? Were those responses effective? Why or why not?
- Adele Ahlberg Calhoun writes, "Solitude with God was a way Jesus remained in touch with his true identity with God."<sup>2</sup> What is the difference between solitude and loneliness? How could embracing solitude be a positive path forward for those living with ongoing health conditions?

---

<sup>2</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 129.

### Put It into Practice

Read a patient health blog or talk to someone willing to share their health story. Listen actively to them and note what stands out to you regarding how they manage their condition.

### Closing Prayer

Prayerfully meditate on Philippians 4:6-7: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

As you pray, thank God for his constant presence and his desire to hear your petitions. Receive his peace that passes all understanding as you pray for yourself or others living with challenging health conditions.

## GUILT

*Blame and God's greater purposes*



Scripture Reading: [John 9:1-7; 24-34](#)

*As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. <sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

*<sup>3</sup> "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup> As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. <sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

*<sup>6</sup> After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. <sup>7</sup> "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.*

.....

*<sup>24</sup> A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner.*

*<sup>25</sup> He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"*

*<sup>26</sup> Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"*

*<sup>27</sup> He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"*

*<sup>28</sup> Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! <sup>29</sup> We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."*

<sup>30</sup> The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. <sup>32</sup> Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. <sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

<sup>34</sup> To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

## Reflection

My fifteen-year-old daughter came to me one morning in deep distress. She asked if she could stay home from school as she pulled back her shirt sleeves to reveal a number of parallel cuts on her arm. That day her mental illness thrust our family into a yearslong crisis.

My parents came over a week later to check on my daughter and the family. As we explained her new bipolar disorder diagnosis, I felt shocked at my mom's response. She demanded to know what we did to her, or what she did to bring on this disorder. I didn't know how to respond—we didn't do anything that we knew of.

When Jesus' disciples ask who sinned, the person born blind or his parents, they implicitly assumed that someone's sinful actions caused the blindness. They didn't know who was guilty, only that someone must have done something horribly wrong. The Pharisees say the quiet part out loud: *the man is steeped in sin*.

Blaming the patient goes back to ancient times. It's alive and well today, only in subtler forms using a different lexicon. A person's weight gain or diabetes is attributed to their overeating or eating junk food. Someone with HIV must have a permissive lifestyle. If my psoriasis doesn't improve, it's because I'm not following someone's advice or taking care of myself.

Jesus had a different response to the man born blind. While he doesn't attribute it to sin, he doesn't give a medical reason either. His response appears to say that God caused the man's blindness for the purpose of being glorified in his healing. However, since the phrase "so that the work of God" applies to the following clause, it points to the purpose of Jesus' work. Thus, it should read, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. But so that the work of God might be displayed in his life, we must do the work of him who sent me while it is still day."

Jesus is there to reveal God's glory as he does the work of healing. He's not looking for who is guilty, but rather to bring wholeness and restoration. As one commentator declares, "The glory of this man's healing stands in stark contrast with the desperation of his condition. Jesus did not simply give him sight; he gave him life."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: John*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 280.

### Opener

How would losing your eyesight change your life?

### Discussion Questions

- The disciples asked the question “who sinned?” regarding the man who was blind from birth (v. 2). The Pharisees also assume sin caused his blindness (v. 24, 34). Their way of thinking revealed the prevailing understanding of those born with physical disease and disability.

Summarize what you learn about the relationship between sin and illness in biblical times.

- What was Jesus’ response to the question of who sinned to cause the man to be born blind? What does his response tell us about God’s Kingdom and what Jesus came to do (vv. 3-5)?
- Why do you think Jesus healed the blind man in the way he chose (vv. 6-7)?
- How did the blind man see himself after Jesus healed him? How did he view Jesus afterwards?
- What would you say to someone who blamed a person’s previous actions or behavior for their acute or chronic health condition?

### Put It into Practice

Reflect on a weakness, failure, or physical condition. What is your understanding of its cause and what God might be doing in your life through it?

### Closing Prayer

Paul wrote to the Romans, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”* (Romans 8:28).

Thank God that no matter what the reason for physical illness or suffering, that he can use it for his ultimate purposes. Pray for those who might be blamed, or feel guilty, for their health conditions to experience God’s grace and mercy.



## DESPAIR

*Being healed and known by Jesus*



### Scripture Reading: [Mark 5:24b-34](#)

*A large crowd followed and pressed around him. <sup>25</sup> And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. <sup>26</sup> She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. <sup>27</sup> When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, <sup>28</sup> because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." <sup>29</sup> Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.*

*<sup>30</sup> At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him. He turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my clothes?"*

*<sup>31</sup> "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask, 'Who touched me?'"*

*<sup>32</sup> But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. <sup>33</sup> Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. <sup>34</sup> He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering."*

### Reflection

Since that fateful visit to UCSF as a child, I've been to countless clinic visits over the decades. I measured time by treatments tried and failed, severe flares that covered my body, and changes in health insurance coverage. Along the way, losses stacked up like a tower of Lego blocks. I daily lost time managing a severe disease, lost peace of mind as I experienced discomfort, and lost opportunities feeling a lack of confidence or strength to tackle them.

Twenty-five years later I found myself back at UCSF, stuck in the lowest valley of my health journey. My dermatologist had referred me to a world-renowned psoriasis expert, Dr. K, for consultation. Treatment after treatment failed to calm the inflammation that covered 95% of my skin for over two years. We hoped Dr. K could provide a therapy to bring some relief.

When he came into the clinic room I broke down in tears, exhausted and desperate. Dr. K said he could help and offered me two options. I decided to take pills that could damage my kidneys but promised to calm that seemingly unending flare. Within a couple of weeks, I began to see signs of improvement.

The woman who lived with bleeding for twelve years felt the desperation of having a life-altering condition. The biblical account tells us she expended all her resources coming under the care of doctors who didn't help. To make matters even worse, she suffered the social and relational poverty that comes from an unremitting bleeding condition.

Craig Keener asserts, "This woman's sickness was reckoned as if she had a menstrual period all month long; it made her continually unclean under the law (Lev 15:25-28)—a social and religious problem on top of the physical one."<sup>4</sup> Having nothing else to lose, she took the risk of making Jesus ceremonially unclean by reaching out to touch the edge of his cloak.

That step of faith, when all else failed, took a boldness and courage from the depths of her soul. Jesus responded with an equally deep healing that transformed her life. He showed himself to be different than those supposed healers who took her money as she continued to suffer.

### Opener

Imagine you are diagnosed with an incurable acute or chronic health condition. What steps would you be willing to take to address it?

### Discussion Questions

- What made this woman's situation so desperate after twelve years of suffering with a bleeding condition?
- Why did Jesus ask, "Who touched my clothes?" after the woman reached out to him and what was the disciples' response to him?
- What might have the woman feared when she finally admitted to touching Jesus?
- What purpose did the woman's public acknowledgement serve in her healing? How do you think she felt when Jesus said, "*Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering*" (v. 34).

---

<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 148.

- The bleeding woman couldn't pay enough to be healed. How might living with a health condition with no true cure affect a person's mind and spirit?

### Put It into Practice

Choose a health condition that you have heard about from friends, family, or in drug advertisements and research how much it costs to manage that condition. Imagine what life is like living with it.

### Closing Prayer

Thank Jesus that he is the Physician and Healer who can bring about wholeness in any broken situation. Pray for those in your life who are living with ongoing health issues that they might live by faith with courage in his strength.

## STIGMA

### Acceptance and (re)integration into community



#### Scripture Reading: [Mark 1:40-45](#)

<sup>40</sup> A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

<sup>41</sup> Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" <sup>42</sup> Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

<sup>43</sup> Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: <sup>44</sup> "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them." <sup>45</sup> Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

#### Reflection

Studying the Gospel of Mark in InterVarsity made the Scriptures come alive and showed me the heart and mission of Jesus. The leper who came begging on his knees to Jesus quickly became my favorite Bible story. I felt like I was that leper also having a disease that stigmatizes and ostracizes from society.

The Levitical code establishes the regulations concerning infectious skin conditions. The leper would be "sequestered from normal society and, if cured, could be restored to it only after examination by the priest and the offering of sacrifice (Leviticus 13-14)."<sup>5</sup>

When these skin manifestations were found on a person in the community, they had to be taken to Aaron or another of his sons in the priesthood (Lev. 13:2). The priest would examine the skin and take the action prescribed by the LORD. The leper who approached Jesus was undoubtedly sequestered from his family and community. Only a remission of symptoms confirmed by the priest would allow him to reenter society.

---

<sup>5</sup> I. Howard Marshall, I, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 208.

Jesus reached out to touch the man (v. 41). It's a small detail with huge implications. As I imagined Jesus placing his hand on me, a tear streamed down my face. For most of my life I felt like that leper, untouchable and unlovable. Bullying, insensitive questions, and unsightly skin placed me in a prison with a moat separating me from everyone else. That single touch communicated Jesus' acceptance to the leper and the healing needed for him to rejoin community. It did the same for me.

### Opener

When have you felt separated and different from others? What, if anything, has helped you overcome those feelings?

### Discussion Questions

- What observations can you make about the leper based on his actions and what he asks of Jesus? Why does he qualify his request by first saying, "If you are willing"?
- Is Jesus' response to the leper expected given his situation? What are other possible ways Jesus could have responded to a leper approaching him?
- Why is it significant that Jesus directed the man with leprosy to first show himself to the priest (v. 44)?
- How did Jesus' interaction with the leper bring about more than physical healing? Why is healing the body, mind, and spirit equally important?
- How can community members be the "hands of Jesus" to those who are living with potentially stigmatizing health conditions?

### Put It into Practice

This week observe how you respond to different people you encounter as you go about your day. Note if there are certain people you instinctively push away or distance yourself from. Reflect on what would be a godly response.

### Closing Prayer

Ask Jesus to help you truly see with compassion those who might be struggling silently with their health concerns. If a friend, family member, or neighbor comes to mind, pray for them to be touched and healed by Jesus.

## SKEPTICISM

*Receiving healing God's way*



### Scripture Reading: 2 Kings 5:9-15

<sup>9</sup> So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house.<sup>10</sup> Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed."

<sup>11</sup> But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. <sup>12</sup> Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage.

<sup>13</sup> Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!" <sup>14</sup> So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

<sup>15</sup> Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant."

### Reflection

I'm naturally a skeptical person, especially when it comes to my health. It seems like everyone has a cure or remedy for me when they hear I suffer from "a rash." I don't have the energy to describe how psoriasis is rooted in the immune system. It's hard to explain how I've tried every supposed treatment under the sun over many decades.

So, when my dad told me to start a gluten-free diet, I wanted to tell him that there's little evidence that it helps most people living with psoriasis. The few that have celiac disease do gain some relief, but I tested negative for those biomarkers. I told him curtly that if he wanted to try it for his newly diagnosed psoriasis, then I wouldn't stop him.

Secretly, I tried the diet anyway. It didn't help me, but my dad found a great deal of relief with it. My skepticism would not have served him well. In a kindred spirit, Naaman responds incredulously to Elisha's message to wash in the Jordan River to clear his leprosy. There are more impressive rivers in Syria, he reasons. Or Elisha could have showed up himself and waved his hand over the leprosy to shoo it away.

He stomped off wishing Elisha provided a real solution to his desperate health condition. Surely, as a respected and decorated commander of Syria's army, he deserved better.

Naaman's servants, however, convinced him to try it Elisha's way. It wasn't the way that he expected or wanted, but it worked. His skepticism turned to faith, proclaiming, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15). Naaman not only left as a cured man, but also as a changed one. The one who commanded soldiers learned to follow a new way.

Naaman's story shows me I should not limit God. Part of remaining hopeful with my ongoing health challenges is to recognize a God who is like no other as Naaman did in the end. If I look only at the methods or means, I lose sight of the source of my life and healing.

### Opener

When is skepticism warranted, and when should it be suspended, in approaching a healthcare decision?

### Discussion Questions

- Read the background of Naaman's story in [2 Kings 5:1-8](#). What events led to Elisha sending a servant to direct Naaman to wash in the Jordan River? What is the king of Israel's response to the letter from the king of Aram requesting Naaman be healed?
- Imagine you are Naaman hearing Elisha's directions. How would you react? Do you feel he has a right to be angry given his high position and perplexing health?
- What would have happened if Naaman remained indignant and didn't try to wash in the Jordan River?
- Why did Naaman make a declaration about God when he returned with his attendants to see Elisha?
- What role does openness to new ways of approaching healthcare play in the healing process?

### Put It into Practice

One psoriasis treatment was discovered while treating kidney transplant patients who were also diagnosed with psoriasis. Think of another situation where an innovative cure or therapy came about in an unexpected and surprising way.

### Closing Prayer

Pray for someone whom you know who has a difficult-to-treat health condition. Pray that they might be open to whatever God has for them amid their perplexing situation and that God can speak into a spirit of confusion, fear, or anger that might be present.



## DISAPPOINTMENT

*Finding God's sufficient grace in suffering*



### Scripture Reading: [2 Corinthians 12:7b-12](#)

*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup> Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup> But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup> That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

### Reflection

The faith healing movement came to town when I was a young Christian. They proclaimed that Jesus had the power to cure all ailments and promised he would do so—with one caveat. You had to have enough faith. If you didn't experience healing, then it was assumed you did not have the requisite faith.

So, I prayed repeatedly for God's promise to heal me of psoriatic disease. Over time I became despondent and disappointed. I questioned if I had enough faith. I wondered if I had done something wrong. Then I read about Paul's thorn in his flesh. He told the Corinthians that it tormented him. We aren't privy to what the thorn was although some believe he had an eye ailment. He makes mention to the Galatians of an illness that first led him to preach to them (Gal. 4:13-15). The Galatians, Paul says, would have torn their eyes out and given them to him.

The thorn in his flesh caused him enough discomfort that it led him to desperately pray three times for it to be removed. God replied that his grace is sufficient for Paul. Did Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles and author of letters in the New Testament, not have enough faith for God to heal him? Not at all. God told Paul that the thorn would shape his character and humble him.

Instead of focusing on my disappointment in God, I began to look at what God might be doing in me and through me as I suffered with chronic severe skin inflammation. Paul's experience showed me that the Gospel doesn't promise healing, at least on this side of

heaven. The Gospel declares that Christ overcame death, not that I would never get sick or die. The promise of a resurrected life is an everlasting one.

It's natural to feel disappointed when God doesn't come through in the way we hope. In these moments when we feel weak, helpless, or lost we recognize the truth of our limitations. Only then can God fill us up with his grace to face any illness or hardship.

### Opener

Share a time when you asked God or another person for one thing and received an unexpected answer. What was your response?

### Discussion Questions

- Where does Paul say the thorn in his flesh came from? Can we ascribe illnesses today to the same source?
- How many times does Paul petition God to remove the thorn in his flesh? Why doesn't God answer Paul's prayer the way he hopes?
- What do you think Paul was feeling before he prayed to God about his thorn? After he realized it would not be removed?
- Do you think it was right for Paul to ask God for healing? When is it appropriate for a believer to pray for healing from physical illnesses or disabilities?
- What might it look like for a person suffering to experience God's "sufficient grace" each day?

### Put It into Practice

Talk to a ministry leader or mature believer about how they approach disappointment, focusing on health if applicable. Ask how their situation impacts their life and how they relate to God amid ongoing challenges. Make notes on what you can learn from their approach to life and faith.

### Closing Prayer

Write a journal entry or prayer to God about a difficulty or disappointment you are facing. Pay attention to the emotions you are experiencing, releasing them to God. Ask for God to reveal his power and strength in places you feel weak.

## VULNERABILITY

### *Dependence and Dignity*



#### Scripture Reading: John 5:1-9

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. <sup>2</sup> Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. <sup>3</sup> Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. <sup>5</sup> One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. <sup>6</sup> When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

<sup>7</sup> “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

<sup>8</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” <sup>9</sup> At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

#### Reflection

I first gained a glimpse into my wife Lori’s spina bifida early in our marriage. She scheduled a round of appointments at the spina bifida clinic held by the regional hospital in Oakland, California. Instead of going to a doctor’s exam room, nine medical specialists came to see Lori in an assigned room. At the end of the day a case worker shared the recommendations from the panel of specialists.

Spinal nerve damage at birth impacted Lori’s bladder, but the surgery performed a few hours after she was born gave her the ability to walk. We saw, unfortunately, others at the daylong clinic had worse outcomes. Most of the patients needed wheelchairs. Others had neurogenic issues like Lori.

Their condition also left them vulnerable to the harsh realities of a society that takes advantage of those who appear weaker or limited. Lori still speaks of the bullying she endured as a child. Her neurogenic bladder is harder to manage as the years go by to the point where she would rather stay home than face the possibility of an embarrassing accident.

The man who met Jesus at the Sheep's Gate pool experienced an even more dire situation. One scholar describes what he faced in the first century world:

The challenges of a paraplegic in the twenty-first century (which are considerable) pale by comparison with a person in the first century. Problems of mobility and livelihood and social isolation just begin the list. ... Taking these issues together, we can build a portrait of this man's life: People moved him from place to place unless he crawled; most of his income came from begging or from the charity of friends and family; and if he did not have bladder or bowel control, his hygiene problem would have been enormous. People stayed away from him.<sup>6</sup>

People overlooked the paraplegic for thirty-eight years, a lifetime in the ancient world. When the pool stirred, people believed that the first one into the water found healing. However, no one helped the paraplegic to be first. When Jesus asks him if he wants to get well, he responds pessimistically and defeatedly, recounting how someone always goes ahead of him. Jesus doesn't help him into the pool but instead tells the man to pick up his mat and walk.

The indignity of dependence. The pain of being overlooked and made to feel small. The stigma of standing out in all the wrong ways. It was in the rear view mirror as the paraplegic walked away from the pool. I wonder if Jesus also spoke to those who begged alongside him at the pool left behind. Their lives undoubtedly would have been changed forever after encountering the Healer.

### Opener

Think about someone who lives with a physical disability. How is their lifestyle affected by their condition?

### Discussion Questions

- What is the significance of Jesus approaching the paraplegic during one of the Jewish Festivals in Jerusalem at the Temple?
- What is the man's response to Jesus' question? Is his response one that you would anticipate given his situation?
- Jesus tells the paraplegic to pick up his mat and walk instead of helping him into the pool. Why?
- Of the challenges the paraplegic faced, which stand out to you?

---

<sup>6</sup> Burge, 183.

- What freedoms did the paraplegic gain after Jesus healed him? Which freedoms do people with disabilities need today?

### Put It into Practice

This week, keep a log of those you observe or encounter who live with some kind of vulnerability. Imagine what it would be like to live with their daily concerns. Share your experience with a friend.

### Closing Prayer

Pray for eyes like Jesus to see those who are dependent on others and vulnerable to the harsh realities of living in this world. As God's Spirit brings people to mind who need Jesus' healing power, pray that they have a life changing encounter with him.

## EPILOGUE: HEALED TO SERVE

Ellen's story showed me how broken and disappointing this world can be.

A bright twenty-year-old college student, Ellen was the cousin of one of my congregation members. I met her amid her courageous fight with brain cancer. Near the end of her battle, I held her hand and prayed for her as she lay in a hospital bed. Her passing reminded me of what Jesus said: *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (John 16:33).

Before the brain tumor incapacitated Ellen, she came to church for a few months. I can still picture her sitting in the front row on the left side of the sanctuary taking in worship songs and Scripture. She didn't have much time to grow in her faith or serve the church. Her presence at worship service, though, spoke loudly to how Jesus has overcome the brokenness and illness.

God redeems the patient's experience through the healing hand of Jesus. Like the Apostle Paul, I've come to accept that I might not receive physical healing from psoriasis in this life. If I'm going to have a brokenness in my body, then I'll lean into the hope of healing in heaven.

In the meantime, join me in asking God how we can serve him and those around us with the health and energy he provides. Let's tell the story of how every encounter with Jesus changes lives, including ours first.

Years later Ellen's story continues to inspire me to advocate for the vulnerable even as my own chronic health issues persist. The Apostle Paul also inspires me as one who received God's comfort and turned around to show that same care to others (2 Cor. 1:3-5):

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.*