

IMPOTENCE AND OMNIPOTENCE

“And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there, and knew that he had been in that case a long time, He said to him, Will you be made whole? The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool; but while I am coming, another steps down before me. Jesus said to him, Rise, take up your bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed and walked.”

John 5:5-9

THIS man had been lying, with many others, round the pool, hoping that it would be stirred by the angel, and that he might be the first put into the water and so might be healed. There he waited long, and waited in vain. Why did he wait? Because Jesus was not there. Where Jesus is not, you must wait! If it is only an angel and a pool, you must wait—and one may get a blessing—and many may get no blessing. But when Jesus came, there was no waiting. He walked in among the crowd of sick folk, spied out this man, bade him to take up his mattress and walk home—and he was healed at once.

Now, I commend this man for waiting. I admire him for his patience and his perseverance. But I beg you not to make his case your own. He waited, for Jesus was not there. You may not wait, you must not wait—as I have told you—for Jesus is here! There was necessity for him to wait. As I have told you, there was an angel and a pool, and nothing more. But where Christ is, there should be no waiting. Any soul that looks to Christ tonight shall be saved, even though he looks from the ends of the earth! You may look now—no, you are commanded to do so! “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” “Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.” There, in that pew, or in yonder aisles, if you turn your eyes by faith to Jesus, the Living One on the Throne of the Highest, you shall obtain immediate cure! Waiting is all very well at the Pool of Bethesda, but waiting at the “Pool of Ordinances,” as I have heard some say, is not according to the Scriptures! I read nothing about waiting there! But I do read this—“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.”

However, for the help of some who have waited till they are weary, who have persevered in the use of the means till they are becoming desponding and disappointed, let us look at the case of the impotent man at Bethesda.

1. We notice about it, first, that THE SAVIOR KNEW THE CASE.

I only mention that in order to say that the Savior knows your case. Jesus saw him lying there. There were a great many objects for the Savior’s eye to rest upon, but He fixed His gaze upon this man, long bedridden, 38 years impotent. Even so, Jesus knows all about your case. He sees you lying just where you are, tonight—impotent, without hope, without light, without faith. He sees you! I need you to feel this to be true. He singles you out amidst this throng, wherever you sit, and His eyes are scanning you from head to foot. No, He looks within as well as without, and reads all that is in your heart!

Concerning the man at the pool, Jesus knew that he had been in that case a long time. He knows the years that you have been waiting. You remember being carried to the House of God by your mother. You recollect, as a boy, listening to sermons that seemed to startle you—and you went

home to your little bedroom and cried to God for mercy—but you forgot your impressions. They were like the morning mist that vanishes in the rising sun! You came to London. You grew up to be a man, but you became careless about Divine things—you shook off all your early impressions. Still, you went to hear the Word of God preached and, oftentimes, you half hoped that you might get a blessing. You heard the Word, but faith was not mixed with what you heard, so you missed the blessing. Yet you always had a wish that it should come to you. You never could despise godly people, or the things of Christ. You could not get them for yourself—at least, you thought you could not—but you always had some lingering wish that you were numbered with the people of God.

Now, the Lord Jesus knows all about that and the many years in which you have been waiting as a hearer, only, and not a doer of the Word—impressed at times, but doing violence to your better feelings and going back to a careless life. My Lord knows all about you! I cannot pick you out in this congregation, but remember, while I am preaching tonight, miracles will be worked—processes which will change the very nature of men are going on within this house, for Christ is being preached and His Gospel is being set forth! And this is not done, with prayerful earnestness, in vain! God will bless it! He is going to bless somebody tonight! Who that somebody may be, or how many hundred somebodies there will be, I cannot guess—but He will bless His own Word—and why should He not bless you? He sees just who you are and where you are—and what you are.

In addition to this, our Lord knew all this poor man's disappointments. Many times, when he had striven to be the first to the water's edge and thought that he would be able to take the happy plunge, someone else went in before him and his hopes were dashed! Another came up out of the water healed and then, with a very heavy sigh, he fell back upon his bed and felt that it might be a long time before the angel stirred the water, again, and even then he might be disappointed again! He remembered the many times when he had lost all hope and he lay there almost in despair. Now I think I hear someone here tonight saying, "My brother found the Lord. My friend who came here with me, found the Lord. I have lived to see my mother die in sure and certain hope of Glory. I have friends who have come to Christ, but I am still living without Him. When there are special services, I hope that I might have been specially blessed. I have been to Prayer Meetings, I have read my Bible in secret and I have sometimes hoped—it was but a little hope, but still I hoped—'Maybe, one of these days, I may be healed.'" Yes, dear Friend, and my Lord knows all about that, and He sympathizes in all the grief you feel tonight—and He hears those unspoken wishes of yours—and He knows your longing that you may be healed!

II. Now, secondly, THE SAVIOR AWAKENED THE MAN'S DESIRES. He said to him, "Will you be made whole?" There he lay. I am not going to explain that lying at the pool, but just apply it to you who are here in a similar condition.

Beware of forgetting why you are here. Beware of coming to the House of God and not knowing why you come! I have said that, years ago, you went to places of worship in the hope of finding salvation. Well, you have kept coming and you have not found it—do you still look for it? Have you not fallen into the habit of sitting and listening to sermons, prayers and so on, without feeling that you came for anything special for yourself? You come and go, merely that you may attend a place of worship. That is all. The Savior would not let the impotent man lie there satisfied because he was by the pool. No, no. He said to him, "Why are you here? Have you not some desire? Do you want to be made whole?" My dear Hearer, I wish that you were able to say, "Yes," to that question! Have you come here tonight that your sin may be forgiven, that your soul may be renewed by Divine Grace, that you may meet Christ? If so, I want to keep you to that point and not let you come and take a sitting here, and come, and come, and come, and come, and be just like a door on its hinges out there, which turns in and turns out again, and is not a bit better for it! Oh, do not get into mere religious habits! Ritualistic habits they will be to you, simple as the ritual will be. You come and go, and you are satisfied. This will never do! Christ awakens your desire as He asks, "Will you be made whole?"

Also, avoid a despairing indifference. I remember two brothers and a sister who heard me preach for a considerable time. They were in great distress of soul, but, at the same time, they had a notion that they could not believe in Christ, and that they must wait—I hardly know what for—but

they did wait till they grew quite old. I did not know better people morally, or better hearers so far as interest in what they heard was concerned—but they never seemed to get any farther. At last they got into this state—they seemed to feel as though, if it was to be, it would be—and if it was not to be, it would not be, and that all they could do was just sit still and be quiet and patient.

Patient under the apprehension of being lost forever? Why, I do not expect a man in the condemned cell to be happy and patient when he hears them putting up his gallows! He must be concerned! He must be uneasy. I did my best to make these friends uneasy, but I fear that my efforts were attended with very small results. The Savior said to this man, “Will you be made whole? You seem to be in such a state of indifference that you do not care whether you are made whole or not.” No worse condition than that can be found—it is so hard to deal with! God save you from sullen indifference in which you leave yourself to drift to destruction at the will of some unknown fate!

I pray you to remember that it is yours to will, for Christ said to this man, “Will you be made whole? You cannot make yourself whole, but you can will and wish to be made whole.” God’s Holy Spirit has given to many of you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. You will never be saved against your will! God drags nobody to Heaven by the ears! There must be in you a willing mind consenting to the work of His Sovereign Grace! And if it is there, I want you to exercise it, tonight, as Christ wished this man to exercise it—“Will you be made whole? Have you any wish that way, any desire or longing for healing?” I want to stir this fire and make it burn. And if there is only a spark of desire, I would breathe upon it and pray the Holy Spirit to breathe upon it to make it into a great flame! Paul said, “To will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good, I find not.” I believe that there are some here who have the will to be saved. God be thanked for that!

“Will you be made whole?” I think that the Savior put this question for another reason, which I will turn into an exhortation. Forego all prescribing as to how you are to be saved. The question is not, “Will you be put into that pool?” but, “Will you be made whole?” Have you come to this, that you are willing to be saved in God’s way, in Christ’s way? One says, “I need to have a dream.” Dear Soul, do not want dreams—they are only dreams! Another says, “I need to see a vision.” My dear Friend, there is nothing in the plan of salvation about seeing visions. “I need to hear a voice,” says one. Well, hear my voice, then, and may God the Holy Spirit make you hear the voice of His Word through me! “But I need”—oh, yes, you need, you know not what you need like many a silly child that has its fads, fancies, whims and wishes!

Oh, that all were willing to be saved by the simple plan of believe and live! If this is God’s way, who are you that He should make a new way for you? When I had put the way of salvation before a friend, some time ago, she turned to me and said, “Oh, Sir, do pray for me!” “No,” I said, “I will not pray for you.” “Oh, but,” she said, “how can you say that?” I replied, “I set before you Christ Crucified and I beg you to believe in Him. If you will not believe in Him, you will be lost! And I shall not pray God to make a different way of salvation for you. You deserve to be lost if you will not believe in Christ.” I put it to her and, when she afterwards said, “Oh, I see it now! I do look to Christ and trust Him,” I said, “Now I will pray for you! Now we can pray together and sing together, if necessary.”

But, dear Friends, do not set up your own notion about how you ought to be converted. Can you find any two people who were converted in the same way? God does not make converts as men make steel pens, a gross in a box, all alike. No, no, but in each case there is a living man created—and every living man, every living animal, every living plant—is somewhat different from every other of its kind, and you must not look for uniformity in the work of regeneration. “Will you be made whole?” Come, do you desire the pardon of sin? Do you long for a new heart and a right spirit? If so, leave off disputing as to how you are to get them—and do what Christ tells you to do!

“Will you be made whole?” It is as if the Savior said, “Be more than ever in earnest, now. I know that you will to be made whole. Well, now, will it more tonight than you have ever willed it before.” Let the will which you have be exercised—put it forth! You are in earnest to be saved—be in more earnest tonight! You desire to find Christ? Well, desire to find Christ more tonight than

ever you did in your life! You have come to an important crisis of your life. You may be at the point of death! Who knows? How many have been suddenly struck down of late! If you would be made whole, I would that you might be made whole tonight! I pray that you may feel something pressing you, something that makes you end your long delay, something that makes you feel, "I have no more time to waste! I cannot afford to loiter. I must be saved tonight! I must hear the distant ticking of God's great clock that stands in the Hall of Grace and always says, 'Now! Now! Now! Now! Now! Now!' and never utters any other sound." Oh, may the Lord make it to be so, by His own Free Grace!

Thus, you see, the Savior awakened the desires of the man at the pool. First, He knew his case, and next, He awakened his desires.

III. Now, thirdly, THE SAVIOR HEARD THE MAN'S COMPLAINT. This is what he said, "Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steps down before me."

Some of these people had kind friends who took turns at watching day and night—and the moment that the water was stirred—they took up their patient and plunged him in! This man had lost all his friends—thirty-eight years of illness had worn them all out—and he said, "I have no man to put me into the pool; how can I get into the water?" And there are many in situation who need help. While I have been at Mentone, I have had the joy of leading a number of friends to Christ. When I had to leave them and come back to London, one and another of them said to me, "What can we do without you, Sir? We shall have nobody to lead us in the right way, now. We will have no one to instruct us, no one to meet our objections, nobody to solve our doubts, nobody to whom we can tell the anxieties of our hearts."

No doubt some of you would talk in the same fashion and I must admit that the lack of a helper is serious. It is a great deprivation to have no man to help you in these things. Sometimes, if a friend will come up after the sermon and just say a kind word, it will do more good than the sermon, itself! Many a poor troubled one who has been a long time in prison, might have been released sooner if only some kind friend had reminded the Brother of a Divine promise which, like a key, would have opened the prison door. I agree with you that there is a great help in having an earnest Christian friend to lift you over a difficulty; to bear you down to the water's edge to which you cannot go by yourself, and to put you into the pool. It is a great loss, certainly, if you have no such friend, and I am very sorry for you if you do not.

You live in a village where there is nobody to speak to you about spiritual matters, or you attend a ministry that does not feed you. You have nobody to comfort you. There are not many, after all, who can really help sinners in coming to Christ. Some who try to do so are a great deal too wise and others are too hard-hearted. It needs a special training in the School of Grace if anyone is to learn to sympathize with others so as to be able to really help them. I can suppose that one here is saying, "I have no mother to speak to. I have no Christian friend in the family. I have no one to whom I can go for help—and that is why I stick fast where I am."

Well, a helper is very valuable, but I want to say that a helper may not be so valuable as you think. I have known some who have had plenty of Christian helpers while they were seeking the Lord, but none of them were really able to help them. If you trust the earthly helpers and think them essential, God will not bless their efforts, and they will be of no use to you! I am afraid that many a seeker has had to say, even to good and earnest Christians, what Job said to his friends, "Miserable comforters are you all!" After all, how can a man help you much in your soul's affairs? No man can give you faith, or give you pardon. No man can give you spiritual life, or even spiritual light! Though you have no man to help you, remember that you can make too much of men and you can trust too much in Christian helpers. I beg you remember that.

I am afraid that there are some professors who have been helped a little too much. They heard a sermon and were really impressed by it, and somebody was foolish enough to say to them, "That is conversion." It was never conversion at all! The friend further said, "Now, come forward and make a profession." So they came forward and made a profession of what they never had. A friend

said, "Now, come to such a meeting and come and join the Church. Come on!" And they were led, and led, and led, never having any real internal life, or spiritual energy given them from on high. They are just like children in baby walkers who are unable to walk alone. God save you from a religion that depends upon other people! There are some who have a kind of lean-to religion, resting on somebody else, and when the support is taken away, what becomes of the lean-to? The good old lady who helped you for so many years dies—where is your religion then? The minister used to keep you going—you were like a whipping-top—and he like the whip that kept you spinning. When he is gone, where are you? I entreat you, do not have a religion of that kind! Though a helper is very useful, remember that under certain conditions, even a Christian helper may be a hindrance.

Now, my dear Hearer, this is the point I have come to—you have to deal with Jesus tonight and, dealing with Jesus, you need "no man." You have not to deal with pools and angels! You have to deal with the Lord Jesus, Himself. Suppose that there is no man to help you—do you need a man when Jesus is here? The man was needed to put you into the pool, but he is not needed to introduce you to Christ! You may speak to Christ, yourself! You may confess your sins, yourself. You need no priest—you need a Mediator between your soul and God—but you do not need a mediator between your soul and Jesus! You may come to Him where you are and as you are. Come to Him now! Tell Him your case! Plead with Him for mercy. He does not need my help. He does not need the help of the Archbishop of Canterbury! He does not need the help of anybody—He alone can meet your case! Just put your case into His hands and then, if you have no man to be your helper, you need not lie down and fret about it, for He is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him!

Now this is all very plain talk, but we need plain talk nowadays. I feel as if I have not preached on Sunday unless I have tried to bring men to Christ. There are many high and sublime doctrines that I would like to speak of, and many deep and rapturous experiences that I would like to describe—yet I feel that I must often leave these things and keep to the much more commonplace, but much more useful matter of persuading men, in Christ's stead—that they look away from man, away from ordinances, away from self and deal with Jesus, Himself, distinctly and directly, for there is no need of man and, certainly, there is no need of delay!

IV. This is my closing point. THE SAVIOR MET THE MAN'S CASE ENTIRELY.

This impotent man has no man to help him. Christ can help him without any man. This man cannot move except with great pain. He has to crawl to the water's edge, but he has no need to crawl there—he need not move an inch! The power to heal that man was in Christ who stood there—commissioned of God to save sinners and to help the helpless! Please remember that the power that saves—all of it—is not in the saved man, but in the Christ who saves! I take leave to contradict those who say that salvation is an evolution! All that ever can be evolved out of the sinful heart of man is sin—and nothing else! Salvation is the free gift of God, by Jesus Christ, and the work of it is supernatural. It is done by the Lord, Himself, and He has power to do it, however weak, no, however dead in sin, the sinner may be! As a living child of God, I can say tonight, that—

*"On a life I did not live,
On a death I did not die,
I stake my whole eternity!"*

You who would be saved must do the same—you must look right out of self to Him whom God has exalted to be a Prince and a Savior to the sons of men! The Christ met that man's case, for He was able to do anything for him that he required. He meets your case, too, my dear Hearer, for He can do anything for you that is needed. Between here and Heaven's gate there shall never be anything required which He cannot give, or any help needed which He is not prepared to render—for He has all power in Heaven and in earth!

Next, the Lord can do more for you than you ask of Him. This poor man never asked anything of Christ, except by his looks, and by his lying there at the pool. If you feel, tonight, as if you cannot

pray. If you have needs that you cannot describe. If there is something needed and you do not know what it is, Christ can give it to you! You shall know what it is that you need when you get it, but, perhaps now, in His mercy, He does not let you know all your needs. But here is the point—He “is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.” May He do it in you tonight! Take comfort from the cure of the impotent man! Cherish hope and say, “Why should He not heal me?”

Now, the way in which Christ worked was very amazing. He worked by a command. It is not a way that you and I would have selected—nor a way of which some nominal Christians approve. He said to this man, “Rise.” He could not rise. “Take up your bed.” He could not take up his bed! He had been 38 years unable to get off his bed! “Take up your bed, and walk.” Walk? He could not walk! I have heard some objectors say, “That preacher says to people, ‘Believe.’ They cannot believe. He bids them, ‘Repent.’ They cannot repent.” Ah, well, our Lord is our example and He said to this man who could not rise, and could not take up his bed, and could not walk, “Rise, take up your bed and walk.” This was His way of exercising His Divine Power! And that is the way in which Christ saves men today!

He gives us faith enough to say, “You dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord!” They cannot hear. “Thus says the Lord, You dry bones live!” They cannot live—but they do hear, and they do live—and while we are acting by faith, delivering a command which looks, upon the surface of it, to be absurd and unreasonable, the work of Christ is done by that command! Did He not say of old, in the darkness, “Let there be light”? To what spoke the Lord that Word of power? To darkness and to nothingness! “And there was light.” Now He speaks to the sinner and He says, “Believe and live.” And the sinner believes and lives!

God wants those of His messengers who have faith to give His command, to let the sinner know that he has not the strength to obey, that he is morally lost and ruined, and yet to say, in the name of the eternal God, “Thus says the Lord, Rise, take up your bed, and walk.” Believe, repent, be converted and be baptized, everyone of you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ! This is the way in which Christ’s power goes forth to the sons of men! He said to the man with the withered hand, “Stretch forth your hand,” and he did so! And He says to the dead, “Come forth,” and they come forth! His commandings are attended with enablings—and where His commands are faithfully preached, His power goes with them—and men are saved!

I close with observation. In obedience, power was given. The man did not stop and wrangle with Christ and say, “Rise? What do You mean? You look like a friend, but do You come here to make sport of me? Rise? Thirty-eight years have I been lying here, and You say, ‘Rise’? Do You think that there has ever been a minute in those 38 years in which I would not have gladly risen if I could have done so? And yet You say, ‘Rise,’ and You say ‘Take up your bed. Shoulder the rug on which you lie.’ How can I do it? It is 38 years since I could lift a pound weight and You bid me shoulder this mat on which I lie! Do You make me a theme of jest? And walk? You say, ‘Walk.’ Walk? Hear me, you sick ones around me, He tells me to walk! I can scarcely lift a finger, yet He bids me walk!” Thus he might have argued the matter out and it would have been a very logical piece of argument—and the Savior would have stood convicted of having spoken empty words.

Instead of speaking thus, no sooner did Christ say to him, “Rise,” than he willed, by God’s Grace, to rise! And as he willed to rise, he moved to rise and rise, he did, to his own astonishment! He rose and, stooping down, rolled up his mattress, all the while filled with wonder, every part of his body singing as he rolled it up and put it on his shoulder with speed! To his surprise he found that the joints of his feet and legs could move! And he walked right away with his mattress on his shoulder—and the miracle was complete. Stop, man, stop! Come here! Now, had you the strength to do this of yourself? “No, not I. I lay here 38 years. I had no strength till that word, ‘Rise,’ came to me.” “But did you do it?” “Oh, yes, you can see that I did it! I rose. I folded up the mattress and I walked away!”

“But you were under some kind of compulsion that made you move your legs and your hands, were you not?” “Oh, no! I did it freely, cheerfully, gladly! Compel me to do it? My dear Sir, I clap my hands for joy to think that I could do it! I do not want to go back to that old mat and lie there

again—not I!” “What did you do?” “Well, I scarcely know what I did. I believed Him and I did what He told me, and a strange mysterious power came over me—that is the whole story.” “Now explain it. Tell these people all about it.” “Oh, no,” says the man, “I know that it is so, but I cannot explain it. But one thing I know, whereas I was a cripple, now I can walk! Whereas I was impotent, now I can carry my bed! Whereas I was lying there, now I can stand upright.”

I cannot explain salvation to you, tonight, or how it takes place. But I remember when I sat in the pew as despairing a sinner as ever lived. I heard the preacher say, “Look unto Christ, and live.” He seemed to say to me, “Look! Look! Look! Look!” and I looked—and I lived! That moment the burden of my sin was gone! I was crippled with unbelief no longer! I went home a sinner saved by Grace, to live to praise the Lord, and—

*“Ever since by faith I saw the stream
His flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.”*

I am convinced that I am going to have ever so many, tonight, who will obey the Gospel command, “Believe and live. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” Oh, do it! Do it now! And unto God be glory, and to yourself be peace and happiness forever! Amen and Amen!