

Grounded in Grace



LIVING IN-BETWEEN HURT, HOPE, AND HEALING PT 2 Do you want to be healed?

When Jesus saw the man and realized that he had been crippled for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to be healed?” John 5:6 (CEV)

(Note: This devotional was originally written for a manuscript called “Broken Engagement: Becoming Engaged with God through the Brokenness of Life.” I updated it to include some of my client’s stories. But these stories are a combination of themes, facts, and questions from many of the people I have had the privilege of getting to know. This is done to protect their identity.)

When I first read Jesus’ words, I couldn’t help but think to myself, “Now Jesus that is a strange question. Of course he wants to be healed. Why else would he be lying on a mat?” But when I took a closer look at the question, I began to realize that it was a very insightful inquiry. Jesus was not asking a question about his physical circumstances but about his heart circumstances. Did he really want to be well?

Hanging Out at “Hurt Alley”

During Jesus’ day, many lame, crippled, and blind would gather around a little lake. The belief was that when the water was stirred it possessed powers to heal for the first person who got into it. So people hung out and waited with the anticipation of being the first one into the pool. They were a group of people so wounded by life’s circumstances that they were living in their despair instead of moving through their pain. In essence, they were “hanging out in hurt alley.”

We don’t know his name or where he was from, but we do know the past thirty-eight years. He had been paralyzed, hoping for anything to heal him, lying on a mat in front of Bethesda’s pool. He must have been known throughout the town. Apparently, Jesus knew about him too. I began to ponder the implications of Jesus’ question. What was the man receiving at the pool? Scripture doesn’t tell us, but I can imagine a couple of his needs were being met:

Physical needs- It was customary for people to throw their food scraps out to the beggars and lame people who were homeless.

Pity- Can you imagine the townspeople saying “There’s old Joe- been lying there for some time. He needs a lot of help.” Or “Joe, you are really a burden right now.”

Jesus was asking a more powerful question: “Are you ready to live a changed life or do you like what you are receiving now?” Jesus was aiming at the heart. He had been in this state for thirty- eight years. Did he really want to give up this life in exchange for the challenges and hard work that will come with change? Does he really want to take responsibility for his welfare or continue in this life of free handouts? Is he willing to leave the confines of hurt alley? He had a lot to gain but also much to lose and much more challenging times ahead if he answered the question with a definitive YES.

Hard Questions Echo Down “Hurt Alley”

And as I pondered all of this, I thought back to my client who asked “Can I be fixed?” Here was a woman who spent her whole life living in hurt alley. She spent many years living in the insecurity that her soul was worth nothing. She walked through life avoiding conflict and felt deflated at the slightest words of constructive criticism. She held on tightly to her adult son to avoid the loneliness that would happen if he left to pursue his own happiness. She became defensive, protective, and overbearing. She held grudges from years ago. Bitterness and self-pity became the medicine that soothed her broken soul. I asked her Jesus’ question. We wondered out loud if she really wanted to be healed. We asked the tough questions that I ask now of us as well:

“What have I been receiving? Am I willing to leave the safety of the life I am so used to living? Am I willing to take a hard look at the places of my own soul that need to be healed? Am I ready to be challenged to go deeper into the painful valleys of my heart to begin to delight in the dignity I have lost but also discover the depravity of my heart?”

And honestly, beloved, it would be easier to say no than to say yes. Because by answering yes, we must first admit that there is something wrong. But even more than admitting something needs to be healed, we must acknowledge that we have been receiving something to make us stay in that condition for as long as we did. So what do we receive at hurt alley that would make us stay there? Here are some soul suggestions:

Attention-being noticed by others, even if it is negative

Self-pity-“the woe is me” mentality that my life is harder than anybody else’s

Control- my life revolves around me, my wants, and my desires, and everyone must appease me

Power- I exert my control unto others in order to sooth my pain by making others feel guilt and shame

False sense of innocence- it is everyone else’s fault but mine

Jesus is asking a powerful and pondering question. Do we really want to live a whole-hearted healed life or a wounded bleeding life? What needs to be healed in your life? What are you receiving that keeps you from being healed?

By Dr. Steve Benson