

Considering Your Life On the Mat? – Dan Hitz

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I knew that growing up with a sexually abusive, paranoid schizophrenic mother would leave me with a lot of deep emotional wounds, but little did I know until years after giving my heart back to Jesus Christ as a 22-year old man how deep those wounds actually were. During the abuse, and my mom's progressively deeper plunges into mental illness, I became an expert at turning off my emotions. Emotions hurt. Who wants to feel pain?

My excuse for not letting myself deal with the pain after I became a Christian was that I was a new creation in Christ, and the old stuff had supposedly passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17). I used that verse to convince myself that I didn't have to deal with the issues of the past anymore. The problem is that I was taking that Scripture totally out of context. It wasn't addressing emotional brokenness. It was addressing the beautiful gift of justification that we are given when we accept Jesus as our Savior. Instantly, we are declared to have His righteousness. That part is a done deal through divine decree.

Another one of my "favorite" Scriptures to throw back at the Lord when He was convicting me to deal with my emotional pain was Philippians 3:13. Paul wrote about "forgetting" what was in the past, and "straining" (NIV) toward what is ahead. Never mind that Paul was actually explaining that he didn't base his personal value on his past accomplishments, I used that verse to give myself a "Scriptural" basis to keep trying to shut off my emotions. God wasn't buying it. It wasn't working. I kept trying. Strangely, we who live on a mat like the guy at the pool of Bethesda are good at "straining".

Anyone who has ever tried stuffing their emotions and then been forced to take an honest look at their own heart, can guess how this went. Stuffing our emotions seems to work for a little while. Maybe even a long while. But then the emotional carnage catches up to us. Not just us, but those around us. Our brokenness seems to spread to those we care about the most. After a few years... a few decades... of stuffing our emotions, we lose the strength to suppress them any longer and we unravel. That's what happened to me in my late thirties. I unraveled.

I was a lot like the guy at the pool of Bethesda in John, Chapter Five. ⁵One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. ⁶When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, "Would you like to get well?" My first response to that question is, "Really?!! The poor guy has been lying there handicapped for 38 years and You have the audacity to ask him if he wants to be made well?" Now that I've walked this healing journey for many years, I have a better understanding of that question. Jesus was really asking him, "Are you willing to let Me work in your heart however I want to work in your heart to heal your brokenness?" There's a big difference in those questions. Answering the second question affirmatively also means surrendering one powerful thing – control. Abuse survivors are not particularly good at surrendering control. We didn't have any for so many years. In our hearts we seem to be thinking, "Now... Jesus... You're asking me to give up the tiny amount of control that I've managed to grab on to?" Jesus' response might as well be the words of a popular daytime TV show host, "How's that working for you?" Sooner, rather than later, I hope all of us take the risk to answer the, "How's that working for you?" question truthfully. The answer is, "Not very well."

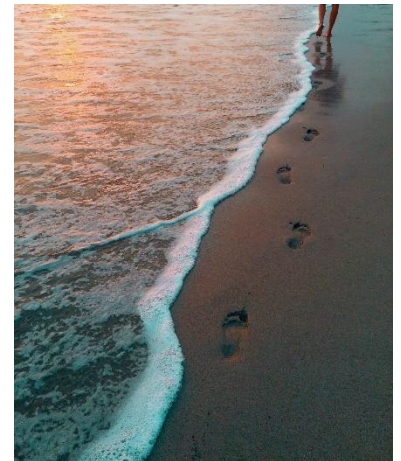
It would be similar to having a long-term physical disability in the US, and Jesus asking us if we want to be made well. Our minds might start to process the cost. Sure things are tuff here on this mat, but I do get a monthly disability check and a Bridge card. My housing is paid for and I do have people taking care of me. If I get better, I'll lose my public assistance and I'll have to take care of myself. I'll have to get a job. I'll have to start paying my own bills, and cooking my own food. I'm not really sure I can take

care of myself. *(I want to be sensitive and acknowledge that there are many people who are on public assistance with legitimate needs. I'm not disparaging them in any way. I'm just trying to highlight the vulnerability and risk that Jesus was asking the man to exercise. If you or someone you care about is on public assistance, please be at peace.)*

The man's doubts start surfacing in the next verse. "I can't sir," the man said, "for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me." (5:8) This shows the man was still looking for another human to put him into the pool, rather than looking directly to Jesus to heal him. It also shows that the man on the mat was very much aware that others were experiencing healing miracles. But not him. He's still on his mat. For 38 years. Other people seem to catch the healing breaks. Somehow we use that as evidence that we'll never get better. We use that pain to motivate ourselves to not even try. Trying is scary. What if we succeed? No more disability checks. No more Bridge card. We will have to start doing things for ourselves. That is frightening. Sometimes it seems easier not to even try.

I've read these passages many times, but just recently noticed another facet of this account that I hadn't noticed before. It comes out in verse eight and we see the results in verse nine. "8 Jesus told him, 'Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!' 9 Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking!" Obviously, Jesus is the healer and the man would not have walked unless he was supernaturally healed, but the thing that hadn't registered before was that Jesus gave him specific instructions – commands – to receive his healing, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!"

Following those commands takes trust. Trust takes vulnerability. It can be terrifying to trust God. In the back of our minds, we might be thinking, "But where were You back when I was being abused?" or "Why are You just now telling me to get off my mat after all these years?" Those are questions that we can talk to the Lord about in due time. He actually has answers for them. If He told us right now we might not understand – or like – the answer, but as we continue in our healing so many things begin to make sense.



Other stumbling blocks to getting off our mats include the fear that we're so messed up that God might not be able to work through us, or we'll screw it up somehow. Sometimes we're actually afraid that He might heal us and then we'll crash because He'll want us to do things that we haven't been able to do. We don't actually believe that He'll continue to equip us for life off the mat. Sometimes we're afraid to even hope that He might heal us because He might not really come through and we'll be even more hopeless than before.

Ultimately, Jesus asks all of us, "Do you want to be made well? Are you willing to trust me and be vulnerable to let Me heal you My way?" I pray that all of us answer that question with a yes. It may be a scared, shaky yes; but a scared, shaky yes is all He asks. It is worth it. As we trust Him, He will give us the ability to "Stand up, pick up our mat, and walk."

As we begin to experience life off the mat, we begin to learn more about God's heart as a redemptive, loving Father. We did experience a measure of His grace while we were living on our mat, but He has so much more for us as we step off the mat. We begin to understand how deeply He always has loved us – even in the worst moments of our lives – as He continues to restore the broken areas of our hearts. We also begin to experience the strength and abilities that Jesus died on the cross to provide for us. As we open our hearts to Him and roll up our mat, we see that He truly does work out everything – the joys and the sorrows – for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).