

Carrying Others

TO THE POOL OF BETHESDA

By Ann E. Tanner



There are many in the Church today who “wait by the pool of Bethesda,” hoping to be carried into the healing waters. Who will help them?

In the fifth chapter of John, the Savior goes to Jerusalem during the “feast of the Jews,” or Passover (see verse 1). He decides to visit the pool of Bethesda. Tradition had it that when the waters of the pool moved, or were troubled by an angel (verse 4), the first person immersed in the water

would be completely healed.

We know that the pool attracted the “blind, halt, withered,” and others who were sick or had disabilities (verse 3). The day the Savior visited was no different.

“And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.



“When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou 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 steppeth down before me.

“Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk. And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked” (verses 5–9).

There are many in the Church today who wait, metaphorically speaking, by the pool of Bethesda hoping to be carried into the healing waters. War veterans might suffer from horrific memories and broken bodies. Other Saints might suffer from the isolation of depression or addiction. Widows live alone or face failing health; families feel devastated by a child’s illness or an unexpected accident; and caregivers work long, lonely hours taking care of a family member. Who will carry these infirm to the pool?

The Savior provided five distinctive examples during His visit to the pool that can serve as guidelines to us in ministering to the sick and afflicted:

1. He looked for one in need.
2. He listened without criticism.
3. He often gave anonymously.
4. He understood and acknowledged grief or disease.
5. He followed up with the sufferer.

Look for a Need

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus Christ made it a point to visit the pool of Bethesda during Passover? At a time when He could have focused solely on the rituals and activities of the Jewish holy days, He looked to help those who were in need.

As a first responder for the American Red Cross, I worked with victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A week after the hurricane hit, a man walked into my office. His legs were grotesquely swollen, and I asked him what had happened. He told me that after the floods destroyed his neighborhood, he found himself alone in chest-deep water. Many of his neighbors were stranded in their attics or on rooftops. He immediately looked for a skiff or small dinghy to bring his friends to higher ground. For hours he sloshed through filthy, polluted water that was full of debris to obtain that boat. (During that time, he sustained numerous cuts that caused his legs to become infected, endangering his life.) Finally, after almost a full day, he located a dinghy. For the next 24 hours straight he rescued dozens of people from their flooded homes. Here was a man who had looked for a need and used his courage and skills to fill it.

Not all needs are so obvious. When a relative of mine was swept from a jetty in Northern California and lost her husband in the same accident, many family members rushed to her side. My brother-in-law very quietly and without fanfare used his skills as an attorney to gather the evidence and legal documents necessary to help this relative obtain a death certificate for her husband, whose body was not recovered. Having the death certificate allowed my relative to access finances for her medical care and daily living. We can all use our specific talents and skills to fill a need.

Listen without Criticism

In John 5:6 we learn that the Savior saw the infirm man “and knew that he had been now a long time in that case.” The Savior allowed the man to explain his situation and his need. Because we are not omniscient, we need to first listen—and do so without being critical.

Often, what is needed most is for us to be prayerful and to listen without giving advice or platitudes. People who are suffering don’t need our explanations for their

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condition. Our well-meaning attempts to put the situation in perspective (our perspective) can unintentionally come across as demeaning or insensitive. In preparing this article and conduct-

ing research, I asked numerous individuals what had been most helpful in returning to health and functionality. Every person said they needed someone to listen to their story or situation without being critical.

I was taken aback by some of the comments that others had made to these individuals in their sorrow or illness. Statements such as “Don’t worry, you still have your other children,” “I know how you feel, and it’s not that bad,” “You’ll find another husband,” “You must have done something wrong in your previous life,” “I don’t want to catch your cancer,” or “Now tell me again how your child died,” increase hurt, isolation, and suffering. Even if such comments are said with the best of intentions, they are best left unsaid.

When we are prayerful, the Spirit can help us know what to say. We might think about saying “I’m so sorry for your loss,” or “I don’t know exactly how you feel, but I’m happy to help in any way possible,” or simply give a hug, or talk to the grieving person about a favorite memory of their loved one. In doing so, we are listening and responding in a Christlike way.

Serve Anonymously

After Jesus Christ healed the man at the pool of Bethesda, the man took up his bed and walked. He was stopped by the Jewish elders and asked why he was cured on the Sabbath and who had done this. The man did not know what to tell them, “for Jesus had conveyed himself away” (John 5:13). Jesus did nothing to bring glory to Himself, but in



all things glorified the Father, setting the perfect example.

Many inside and outside the Church give of their time, talents, and other resources anonymously. A family in

my ward, whose daughter suffered from a life-threatening illness, went to Florida for treatment thanks to a charitable foundation. One night the family decided to go out to dinner on their own and splurge a little bit. After a feast of a meal at a popular restaurant, the father asked for the check. The waitress came over to the table and said, “Oh, there’s no charge. Someone here paid your bill.” The family was stunned. As the mother put it: “I instantly teared up and asked who had done it. She said that they wanted to remain anonymous. All I could do was say, ‘Tell them thank you!’ We got up and left, once again humbled by the generosity of others, even a complete stranger! People are so good.”

Learn about Grief

We know from other scripture that Jesus Christ knows intimately all that we suffer and experience. As Isaiah 53:5 teaches, He “was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” Jesus Christ had learned about and experienced what we suffer so that He could “know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12).

We also can learn and study about what typically happens to individuals in time of crisis. Know that people tend

to lose their concentration and ability to think clearly for sustained periods. Know that victims and patients are not always able to maintain normal sleep patterns. Know that many feel a sense of helplessness and numbness.¹ Know

that grief is a normal and natural reaction to loss² and that the victim might not have the energy to respond to requests and questions. Be prayerful and as you learn these things, you can increase empathy and compassion for the individual and improve your ability to look for needs.

Follow Up with the Sufferer

After the Savior healed the man at the pool of Bethesda, the Savior sought him out at the temple (John 5:14). Jesus then forgave the man of his sins; at that point, the healed man finally knew who cured him. Jesus Christ, who had already done so much for this man, made it a point to seek him out again and cure him of an even more serious illness: his sins. As a result, *complete* healing occurred.

Years ago I worked with a woman whose 16-year-old son had committed suicide. The depth of emotional pain was nearly unbearable for her. She told me that the kindest act anyone did for her happened every year on her son's birthday. On that day, a friend of this woman called her, sent her a card, or took her to lunch in celebration of the boy's birthday. "Someone remembered my son," she told me. "I was so afraid that he would be forgotten."

Many with devastating disease, disability, trauma, or grief face years of suffering. Grief follows no set timeline. As time passes, those who grieve learn to make a life for themselves, but it's still common for them to experience sorrow and yearning. One woman told me that even though her son had passed away 21 years earlier, she still had memories of him "come out of the blue," and felt the sadness return.

While help and assistance at the time of a painful event is certainly important, trauma survivors, people who are grieving, or victims of other distressing situations can encounter several difficult times afterward. For instance, increased sensitivity is especially helpful at the three-month and one-year mark after the distressful event.³ Anniversaries and holidays are delicate times as well.

People might also appreciate consideration or attention during average days. A friend of mine who spent seven years caring for her mother, who had Alzheimer's, told me: "So often I wished someone would just come by and visit



THE ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL

"At the final day the Savior will not ask about the nature of our callings. He will not inquire about our material possessions or fame. He will ask if we ministered to the sick, gave food and drink to the hungry, visited those in prison, or gave succor to the weak (see Matthew 25:31–40). When we reach out to assist the least of Heavenly Father's children, we do it unto Him (see Matthew 25:40). That is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles (1917–2008), "The Great Commandment," *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 30.

my mom—or me. Mom was an integral part of this community for over 50 years, and it just felt like people forgot her—and me.

"I still remember in detail when a friend and her daughter just dropped by and took Mom out for ice cream. What a blessing."

Finally, no tragedy happens in a vacuum. Every person experiencing a life-threatening disease, natural disaster, or grief has family members and friends who are directly affected. They too need help and healing.

When my husband was in a serious pedestrian accident some years ago, a mission president drove for more than two hours late at night on the back roads of the Chilean countryside to our missionary son's apartment. The mission president wanted to be with my son personally to give him the news of the accident, to comfort him, and to be with him as he called his dad. This sensitive mission president provided a sense of relief, hope, and love to our anxious son.

The Savior performed many miracles during His earthly ministry, including the one He performed at Bethesda. Ultimately, healing comes from the Savior Himself, but we can help continue His work of making people whole as we minister to those who face sickness, grief, or disabilities. By using the Savior as our guiding light, we too can learn to find a need, listen without criticism, give anonymously, learn about disease and grief, and follow up with the sufferer. ■

NOTES:

1. J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* (2002), 11–17.
2. John W. James and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Handbook* (1998), 3.
3. J. William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy* (1991), 49.