

Week 4: Living

Title: **Choose Life**

Key Scripture: **The man by the pool of Bethesda – John 5:1–15** (NKJV used, unless otherwise marked)

Daily Guide corresponding pages: **pp78–81**

Three points: **Direction for the journey. Life in a new dimension. The directive to change.**

PowerPoint pointers are marked in this colour.

Introduction

We are now in the fourth week of the series, Paraclesis: Journeying Together. So far, we've looked at caring, loving and journeying. Today we are going to explore the idea of life and the choices we make.

'I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life' (Deut. 30:19). The Israelites were at a crossroads on their journey. Moses wanted to lead them out of the wilderness, where they'd been going around in circles for forty years, and into the Promised Land. They faced a choice, a decision. Moses was giving them ...

Direction for the journey

As we've been noting over these last few weeks, life is a journey.

'Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God' (1 Pet. 1:18, *The Message*). We are learning that the consciousness of God is not somewhere 'out there'; rather, He wants to use us as His conscious presence alongside someone else.

Another meaning of ***parakaleo*** relates to this. The word is 'exhort' or 'exhortation'.

As we journey with people, there comes a point where we want to help them find some direction, guidance, insight and wisdom for their life. Exhorting means bringing direction and guidance. The choices we make determine the direction we take, and our direction determines our destiny.

'I myself am certain of you, brothers, that you are full of what is good, complete in all knowledge, able to give direction to one another' (Rom. 15:14, BBE).

Exhortation needs to be with words of encouragement.

When writing to the Thessalonians, Paul exhorted *and* encouraged them: ***'like a father with his children, we exhorted [parakaleo] each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy of God' (1 Thess. 2:11–12, RSV).***

We can all too often view exhorting as lecturing people, telling them what they need to do; simply discharging knowledge. Bringing direction first starts with encouragement and affirmation.

EXHORTATION: Bringing clear spiritual direction, guidance and understanding; focused on developing wise life choices that shape behaviour patterns and life outcomes.

Exhortation is spiritual direction [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

Life in a new dimension

So how can we ***'live life well'*** as Paul had exhorted and encouraged the Thessalonians?

When Jesus talked about life, He used three different words. The three words, in Greek, were for three different **dimensions** of life. To journey well with people, it is important to understand three-dimensional living ...

1. *Bios*: External life [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

'Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life [bios]' (Luke 8:14).

Bios refers to our lifestyle, our manner of life, how we live and do life day by day. The word 'cares' used here means: struggles, anxieties, worries, commitments, responsibilities. The daily demands of life. Jesus says the cares, riches, and pleasures of external life wrap themselves around us like weeds, throttling and choking us to death.

2. *Psucho*: Internal life [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

‘whoever desires to save his life [psuche] will lose it, but whoever loses his life [psuche] for My sake will save it’ (Luke 9:24).

Psuche refers to the inner world of thoughts, feelings, choices, decisions. It is our private personal world, hidden from view. In other words, the *bios* doesn’t function in a vacuum. Our inner motivations and personal agendas influence and determine our external behaviour patterns.

This leads us to our third dimension ...

3. Zoe: Eternal life [Fill in Daily Guide]

‘I am the way, the truth, and the life [zoe]’ (John 14:6).

Zoe is the word Jesus used most frequently. Any Greek lexicon tells us it means God’s kind of life. Not the *bios* life, not *psuche* life, but life as it can only be found in God. Life out of which creation sprang. The foundation and fount of all life.

‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... In Him was life [zoe], and the life [zoe] was the light of men’ (John 1:1–4).

‘The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life [zoe], and have it to the full’ (John 10:10, NIV).

Journeying is about helping people find direction through facing choices in all of these three dimensions of living.

So let’s look at **John 5:1–15**, where Jesus encounters **the man by the pool of Bethesda**.

Jesus is not in church this Sabbath morning. He’s doing church on the street, down by the pool where there is a gate into the city. There are eight main gates into Jerusalem, but this isn’t one of them; it is a gate where sheep are driven by sheep traders into the city. Inside was the daily cattle market: a noisy place, with thousands of sheep wandering everywhere, all bleating and milling.

‘Now a certain man was there who had an infirmity thirty-eight years’ (John 5:5). This was part of his *bios*, his external life; outer world.

His outer world (*bios*) was:

- A busy and unpleasant place [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

Shepherds, who were buying and selling sheep at the market, would wash their sheep in the pool. And so the pool was smelly, dirty, murky – contaminated and polluted by sheep. And there was not only thousands of sheep but ***‘a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed’*** (John 5:3).

The sick were crowded there, sitting under the five arches to avoid the blistering heat of the sun. They were there because, once in a while, an angel came and stirred the water with healing properties and the first one who got in, out of all the thousands, would be healed.

- An uncertain and competitive place [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

Things could change any minute. Will an angel visit today? Will there be any one to put me in? Will I be first? Will my circumstances change?

There was a continual underlying anxiety and it was a competitive environment. Every day, thousands vied for the opportunity to be healed. If the water moved slightly there was pandemonium. The ruthless crowd surged forward – like a Boxing Day or Black Friday sale – all banking on getting in the pool first.

It was ‘every man for himself’ and a daily battle not to lose your place in the pecking order; to protect your space.

This man, who had been sick for thirty-eight years, lived every day in this miserable, uncertain and competitive place.

Every day he hoped that the waters of the pool would move; that his turn would come; that ‘today’ his world would change. But he was only to be disappointed at the end of the day.

Is this a picture of life today?

People lie by the lottery pool, the promotion pool, the church pool, hoping the water will suddenly move and they’ll be able to ‘get in’ – but living with the constant struggle and disappointment of it never happening for them. In the meantime, they are trapped on the treadmill of life.

- The burden of busyness [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

We live in a busy world. Someone once said, ***‘I’m not stressed out. I’ve just been in a very bad mood for thirty years.’***

We live life juggling mobile phones, networking, texting, emailing, tweeting, multitasking. Our world is just so full, and life so busy. We are swept along with the 'busy, busy' syndrome, caught in grip of 'hurry, hurry' sickness. Bottom lines, targets, deadlines, driven by endless appointments and meetings. Everyone wants everything yesterday. The in-tray of life never empties. Never enough time in the day to get it all done, struggling to hold it all together.

So consumed with our own busyness (maybe hoping something will change in our world through some pool we are living by), we just 'haven't got time' to come alongside someone else to journey with them.

Today, there are many courses that claim to train people on 'time management'. However, there is no such thing as time management. It's an oxymoron, a misnomer because time is constant.

Sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, twenty-four hours in a day and seven days a week. You cannot manage that. God created it to be constant. You'll have a nervous breakdown trying. It can't be done.

Time comes and goes at the same rate it has for centuries. We say time flies, time goes slowly, but it doesn't. It's not about managing time, but about managing ourselves in relation to time. It's about personal management in relation to the resource of time that God has given to us, and we have choices and decisions to make about the busyness of our own lives.

- **The challenge of choice [Fill in *Daily Guide*]**

So, on this day, Jesus came by the man lying by the pool who had suffered for thirty-eight years. Jesus comes to where he is, surrounded by this frenetic daily activity, living by this disappointing pool.

Now you might think that Jesus would heal this man by praying for him or helping him into the pool, but He doesn't. The Bible tells us that He asked the man a question and so offered him a choice: **'Do you want to be made well?' (John 5:6).**

Jesus was speaking to his *psuche* – his inner world. It was a simple 'yes or no' question: 'Do you want your world to change? Do you want this circumstance to be different?'

After lying by this miserable pool for such a long time, you'd think his immediate response would be, 'Yes sir! I have been waiting for this all of my life.'

But he didn't respond like that. He was now held hostage by the **inner** and **outer** world he lived in.

In his inner world (*psuche*), he had:

- **Self-pity** [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

'The sick man answered Him, "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up"' (John 5:7).

In other words, the man was saying to Jesus: **'You don't understand my problem. I am waiting here for the water to stir but when it moves, I've got nobody here to help me. I have no friends. I'm here alone, by myself in this.'** Caught in this terrible world of busyness, with these terrible struggling circumstances, he is ready to blame others for his inability to get into the water. It's other people's fault. We might call this the PLM syndrome: 'poor little me'.

- **Given up and become passive** [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

'while I am coming, another steps down before me' (John 5:7).

Seeing that others are quicker, he's resigned, believing that there will *always* be someone quicker. So he watches the world go by. It seems that something pushed the pause button of life and so he has accepted his lot. He's telling Jesus: **'I'm stuck here struggling, stuck in a freeze frame of life.'**

- **Settled for a victim mentality** [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

Instead of responding, 'Yes Lord', he responds with self-pity, relinquishment and passivity. Why? He has adopted a victim mentality. A victim mentality means we consistently look for reasons why life isn't working for us: **I am the victim of circumstance. Other people did stuff to me, things have happened I had no control over. I'm just caught in it all. I'm simply a victim of my circumstances.**

When we journey alongside people we may find this mentality has developed in them. Very often this is because the circumstance and struggle has lasted for so long. They can be so caught up in their world of busyness, demands, responsibilities and troubles that they are driven by them.

By journeying with them, we can help them begin to understand and face that mentality. We can say: 'Hang on a minute, I can bring some hope, perspective, direction and encouragement to your life.'

The directive to change

Jesus doesn't just walk away, leaving this man to his own devices. He exhorts him with a clear directive. **'Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk"' (John 5:8, NIV).** The man did and so chose life.

This is a huge challenge and one that many face today. People need others to come alongside and journey with them so that they can face and deal with this challenge together.

Paracletis is often about helping people move on from where they are stuck in life. We journey with them out of that situation. Now, this doesn't mean we carry them. Jesus asked the man to pick up his mat and walk by himself. This also doesn't mean that we can force people to move on. They have to make that choice. But we can encourage them to make that choice, as Jesus did.

Let's look at several things about choice:

1. We don't always choose what happens in life [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

Sometimes, struggle is a consequence of our choices and we need to accept responsibility and face that. But at other times, our circumstances have nothing to do with our choices. Some things we have no control over. We didn't choose our parents, we didn't choose the way someone wounded or hurt us etc. We need to recognise that stuff happens in life that we don't choose. However ...

2. We have the freedom to choose what we do with it [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

William Glasser, a well-known American psychiatrist, says that when we help people, we first have to help them face the **reality** of the circumstance, then we have to introduce them to what he calls his second 'R', which is **responsibility**. He says, **'we may not have chosen what has happened to us, but we can choose what we do with it now.'**¹ No matter the circumstances, we can make choices.

3. Life is a series of choices [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

What we choose largely defines us, and we make choices every day. The first choice is whether to stay in bed or to get up. We then choose to live the way we do, and daily choices

we make become what we repeatedly do. We choose our cars, houses, friends, partners, jobs, etc. The power of choice is ours. If we're a workaholic, it's because we choose to be. The encouraging thing is, we can change the things we repeatedly do when we evaluate and change the series of our choices.

4. We are responsible for our choices [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

The key is taking control of our choices. Waking up every morning, the most empowering thing is the realisation that we can 'choose life' today. To know that instead of continuing on doing the same old thing we can choose to make changes. In the *bios* and in the *psuche*, we can draw on an abundant supply of *zoe* life. We can choose to allow God's life to affect what's going on in our inner and outer world because God meets us at the point of choice. **'[Choose to] Walk in the Spirit ... [choose not to] fulfill the lust of the flesh' (Gal. 5:16).**

5. Choices are always consequential [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

There are always consequences to the choices we make. Sometimes we come alongside people who are living with the consequence of a bad choice, and need to help them find direction and insight as we walk with them. Make no mistake, the choices we make today will have an impact on life tomorrow. When we choose a behaviour, we choose its consequences.

6. The loss of felt choice is not the loss of real choice [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

God has made us volitional, choosing beings. Maybe you have lost the sense of your ability to make choices, or maybe have made bad choices and have lost confidence in your own ability? Maybe you need someone to journey with you to help you to find your confidence in God to make choices that are according to His plans and purposes for your life? It is the loss of felt choice that produces a victim mentality, causing us to be creatures of habit. Habit is the unconscious loss of felt choice. When we lose the awareness that we are choosing beings we function on auto-pilot.

7. We can choose to live God's kind of life [Fill in *Daily Guide*]

Jesus gives this man further direction. Not only to stand up and walk, but to change his direction. **'Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, "See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you"' (John 5:14).** This suggests that the man was by that pool because of a wrong choice. Jesus is saying, 'I have called you to choose, you have made that choice, now continue making right choices, choosing the right directions, choosing the God kind of life'. That is the wonderful message of the gospel.

Journeying is not just a matter of helping people re-order their external world. Trying to help people re-organise only their *bios*, like time management, is about as useful as re-arranging deck chairs on *The Titanic*!

But we can help people understand what is going on in their *bios*, and see how that is affected by their *psuche*. That their external disorder is created by internal disorder, that their outer world only reflects the disorder of their inner world. We can help them to come to terms with that, to choose the right direction for their lives.

Paracletis is coming alongside those like this man; getting alongside them, journeying with them, helping them take back control of choice, and choosing life. ***'Where is the man who fears the Lord? God will teach him how to choose the best' (Psa. 25:12, TLB).***

Pitiful or powerful?

The time had come for this man to stop wallowing in self-pity, to get up and do something to change his life. With a victim mentality he was pitiful. But Jesus said he could be powerful. How? By taking his God-given power of choice, standing up, picking up his mat to walk forward in a new direction.

Journeying is helping people pick up their mat and walk, putting one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. What is the mat? Whatever has been our comfort zone; whatever is making our present bad situation comfortable; whatever we have been using as an excuse for lying by the pool.

This man was pitiful but became powerful. Being powerful is not what we achieve, but it is what we choose. That's the wonderful joy of paracletis; journeying with someone through this enabling process.

¹ William Glasser M.D., *Reality Therapy: A New Approach to Psychiatry* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990)

For further reading, see chapter 8 of *Love with Skin On*, Trevor J. Partridge (Farnham: CWR, 2016).

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