

First Light

Capernaum was a vibrant community on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was on a familiar trade route with many businesses and was known for being a prosperous fishing port. And being a cultural melting pot, it was quite the place to be. For Jesus, it provided a home stage from which he would have many opportunities to spread the message of the gospel to other regions. Most up-and-coming politically connected personalities would use a convention venue to loudly proclaim a cause or movement. But on a seemingly ordinary day in this bustling city, Jesus would use a different approach.

Inside the small, crowded room were a variety of listeners, including influential Jewish leaders. As Jesus was explaining the connection between the Law and new life, dust started falling on him and those sitting close by. Light came beaming through the ceiling as a small hole was getting bigger by the second. Faces appeared above on the roof and amidst the commotion, ropes began to slowly lower a make-shift pallet down into the stuffy room through the now huge opening in the roof. On the pallet lied a familiar face. Everyone recognized the somber expression as the paralyzed man inched lower and lower closer to where Jesus was standing. Motivation being strong and access limited, his determined friends had decided to remodel the roof structure to lower him to be right where Jesus was speaking. There was one thing on their minds: restore this man's ability to walk. As he awkwardly rested on the ground by the Teacher, dirt still falling in the deafeningly quiet room, the paralyzed man stared at everyone there. His life had been a theater of indignity, embarrassment and humiliation, being ever dependent on others and unable to participate in any Sabbath ceremony or productive business like all those in the crowded space. With the dust from the roof still on his shoulders, Jesus calmly told the man to "Take heart". For years, people had often told the paralyzed man to "hang in there", "pray harder", and to "look on the bright side". But Jesus proceeded to make a statement that would forever bridge his identity with things eternal for all in the room. "Your sins are forgiven." While the Jewish teachers grimaced at his comment, Jesus read the thoughts written on their faces and firmly instructed the shriveled man to get up and walk. What happened next caused the crowd to marvel, but what happened first was the purpose of his coming to this little fishing town.

It was the perfect city for Jesus to meet the business leaders and the decision-makers. But it ultimately turned out to be where he would contact the unlovely and the broken and this same city that Jesus would call "home", he would later speak in condemnation for its lack of belief. The story of the paralyzed man lowered through the roof of that small house has been told in children's Bible classes and study groups throughout the ages. But as we read the accounts of the paralyzed man in Matthew 9, Mark 2, and Luke 5, what do we notice? Are we focused on the heroic effort of his friends to help him to walk and to work and to live? Is it the sudden miraculous strength in those scrawny legs that we notice in this story?

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Are we drawn to the paradox of religious leaders scowling as this undergrad from Nazareth tries to tell them about godly living? Are we paying attention to the right thing?

Matthew 9 Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over, and came to his own town. 2 Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."

3 At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, "This fellow is blaspheming!" 4 Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, "Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? 5 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?' 6 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, take your mat and go home." 7 Then the man got up and went home. 8 When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to man.

To be sure, as the man skipped out of the crowded, dusty room with mat rolled under his arm, his stature and step were breathtakingly beautiful. Perhaps a family member still standing on the roof overcome with emotion, wept tears of joy falling on that dusty floor where his disabled brother lied just a few moments earlier. But it was actually Jesus' first words of comfort and forgiveness that changed the man from shriveled to whole and it is those same healing words that truly sing through the ages in a heavenly chorus of renewal, restoration, and redemption. Jesus' words are a humbling and calming reminder for us that Jesus still forgives sins today just like he did in a dusty crowded room in the busy, hectic, unrepentant city of Capernaum. He still says, "Take heart" and he still gives healing - but the real reason he set foot on planet Earth was not to lift a paralyzed man to his feet, but to raise his soul so that he might stand tall before the Father, forgiven.