

March 16, 2025

A DRAMATIC HEALING AND JESUS' TESTIMONY ABOUT HIMSELF

Mark 2:1-12

*(3 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)*

It has been the widely held position throughout history that Mark was largely dependent on Peter for his gospel. And you could imagine how incredibly exciting this would have been for someone like Mark if that were the case. Consider the text we're looking at today. You can imagine Mark asking Peter at some point prior to writing this, "When was the first time, after he called you to follow him, that you realized he wasn't just another prophet?" And Peter said, "Well, let me tell you a story of when Jesus claimed to have the authority to forgive sins," and he told the story that we're looking at this morning—the story of the healing of the paralytic.

Including this story at this point in Mark's gospel makes sense if you're following what we've seen to this point. I noted in our first week in Mark that he shows four sources of testimony that Jesus is nothing less than the God-man. He is God's promised King who would come, bring God's saving rule into this world, and show us the blessings of God's kingdom. Then, last week we noted that this is the very thing we see. Jesus brings God's saving rule, his kingdom, into the world, so that we see him gathering a people into the kingdom, driving back every force of darkness, and eradicating the devastating effects of sin as he heals.

But there was also another note that the Old Testament promised that God's kingdom would bring. Jeremiah promised that as the new age invaded this present age, there would also come forgiveness of sins. And so, if you finished reading the Old Testament and opened the gospel of Mark, seeing all that Jesus is doing as he announces the arrival of God's kingdom, you might be saying, "Man, Jesus is bringing nearly every blessing that God's kingdom—his saving rule—promised in the prophets." And the reason you would say *nearly* every blessing is because you might be thinking, "But what about the forgiveness of sins?" Then you'd read chapter 2, and in the opening scene of this chapter we read a story about a paralytic being healed.

Well, at least, that's often how we think about this story. What gets the headlines in this story is that a man who couldn't walk is able by the end of the encounter with Jesus to stand up, pick up his bed, and walk away on his own two feet. But the healing of the paralytic is secondary. Mark 2:1-12 actually tells us a story of a paralytic who was weighed down with sin that had devastated his life being forgiven of his sins. That's the headline of this text. Jesus has authority to forgive sins. And the implications of that are amazing. But before we get there, I want us simply to walk through the details of this story, and then I want us to consider what Jesus' actions say about who he is and what that means for us.

As you get to Mark 2, Jesus' fame is growing. Mark tells us that after the miracles of chapter 1, which had been performed in Capernaum, Jesus had gone away for a bit. But now he was back in town, and word began to spread that Jesus was there. And so the crowds come to the home

where he was, which most likely was Peter's house (the very house where Jesus had already performed the miracle of taking away Peter's mother-in-law's fever and making her well).

As the crowds gather at the house where Jesus is, there are so many of them, that there's no room for anyone to get in, even at the door. It's packed. So Jesus begins preaching the Word to this packed house. We don't know precisely what he's teaching because (as I've already noted), Mark seems more focused on sharing with us more of Jesus' actions than the content of his teaching.

So, everything is going along fine when four men show up, carrying a fourth friend of theirs who was a paralytic on his bed. No doubt word had gotten to them as well that Jesus was in town, and they had an idea. You can easily imagine four men getting together, talking about the fact that the guy who'd cast out demons, healed many, and even cleansed a leper was back in town when one of them said, "I bet he could heal our friend." And so while everybody else was rushing to get to Jesus at the moment news got out that he was in town, these men had first made a stop to get their paralyzed friend. But because of their delay, when they show up, there's simply no making their way through the crowds to get to Jesus.

Lili and I experienced this on a twenty-five anniversary trip we took to London (one year early) last summer. And as soon as we got into the city, we saw crowds moving in a certain direction, and we realized that they were all going to Buckingham Palace to see the changing of the guard. And when we got there, it was quite a scene. There were so many people packed into this circle area that you could barely move. Police were yelling out to be aware of pickpocketing. It was crazy. The problem, however, was that if you were actually going to see the changing of the guard, you had to get a lot closer than Lili and I were. You would have to push your way through the crowd, making it all the way to the fence surrounding Buckingham Palace. So most people would just recognize that and suggest coming back another time, showing up earlier, or simply be content to say they were there. But I didn't love that option, so I took Lili's hand and we began pushing forward. If there was a space in the crowd that gave me any opening, I took it, and pulled Lili with me until, amazingly, we made it up to the gate. Now, my triumph was dampened a bit when we realized that the band was playing "Dancing Queen" and other similar songs to honor pride month. To say it lacked the dignity that I felt the moment demanded was an understatement.

That's the kind of scene these men were faced with. But there's no slipping through the cracks in the crowd when there are four of you, each holding the corner of your friend's bed. But they didn't give up. At that time and place, most (if not all) of the homes had flat roofs. We see this throughout the Bible. When Peter has his vision of the animals coming down on a sheet before he goes to the house of Cornelius, he is praying on his roof (Acts 10:9). When Samuel encounters Saul as the Lord indicates he'll be Israel's first king, Samuel invites him to stay the night, and the text says that "a bed was spread for Saul *on the roof*" (1 Samuel 9:25). Now, that sounds crazy unless you realize that the roofs were flat and utilized much like a deck. They even had outdoor staircases that led right up to them.

And because this house was structured that same way, the men saw their opening. They took the staircase right up to the roof and began to tear a hole in it. Now, they were able to do this because their roofs weren't structured with the sophistication of ours. They were made up of sticks, branches, mud, and clay that would sufficiently support someone on the roof but not so solid that you'd need a jackhammer to get through it. And so the men begin to tear away at it, hoping to make a hole big enough to lower their friend through to Jesus.

Obviously, at this point we have a whole lot of questions that Mark just isn't interested in answering. Did Jesus keep teaching while this was going on? Did the crowd stay locked in on Jesus while debris would have been falling on their heads? I mean, I remember a deer walking up outside of these windows once, and I thought, "I might as well stop talking until this deer goes away." Imagine how distracting it would be for someone to be tearing. A hole in the ceiling. But again, none of those details are given to us. We're simply told that once the hole was big enough to let their friend through, they lowered him down on his bed in front of Jesus.

Now, what happens next is a bit surprising. We're told, "And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven'" (v. 5). A few elements here are surprising. But first, let's note something not at all surprising. It *isn't* surprising that faith brings about this blessing. After all, it's almost always in response to faith that someone is healed, and it is by faith that we're declared righteous. Faith is almost always the instrumental means the Lord uses to bless us. But what perhaps is surprising is that Jesus saw "their" faith. We probably anticipate Mark telling us that Jesus saw "his" faith, meaning the faith of the paralytic. But that's not what he says. Jesus saw "their" faith. Minimally this means the faith of the man's friends. After all, they are the one's who'd brought their friend and taken great measures to get him in front of Jesus, believing that Jesus could heal him. I think, however, based on Jesus' address to the man, that "their" includes the paralytic as well. I think this man, who was unable to walk and must be carried around, also believed that Jesus could do something to address his condition.

But the most surprising element in what Jesus does is that as he speaks, he doesn't say, "Son, be healed" but "Son, your sins are forgiven." Why does Jesus say that? Well, it seems that this man's paralysis was tied to his sin. Now, just to be clear, it's certainly not always the case that sickness, disease, and the like are tied to sin. Jesus heals many others throughout the gospels without any mention of their sins. There's nothing in the book of Job that suggests that Job's suffering was tied to his sins, despite his friends' constant insistence to the contrary. Moreover, at one point, Jesus' disciples ask him whether a man's blindness was due his own sin or the sins of his parents, and Jesus tells them that neither is the case, but it is simply to display the works of God as Jesus healed him.

But the fact that this is certainly not *always* the case doesn't mean that it is *never* the case. We know from Paul's letters to the Corinthians that some had gotten sick and others died precisely because of their sin (1 Cor 11:30). And I think it's the case here. The reason I think so is because Jesus' response doesn't make sense to me otherwise. First, Jesus addresses him as "son," an address with carries affection and understanding. In Matthew's gospel, Matthew adds a bit more detail, telling us that Jesus said, "Take heart, my son" (Matt 9:2). In other words, this warm

greeting seems to suggest that Jesus is about to address the issue that he and the paralytic both know is weighing on his heart. So, for Jesus to address the man this warmly and then take up an issue that isn't on the man's heart makes no sense to me. I think this man's sin weighed heavy on him, and he knew his condition was tied to it. Every day that he woke up, realizing that he couldn't walk, it was another reminder of his sin, weighing more heavily with each passing day. And again, by greeting him as, "Son," Jesus was saying, "I'm going to address what you and I—and likely only you and I—know is the main issue." And so Jesus tells him that his sins are forgiven.

But as much as Jesus' words must have brought immense comfort to the paralytic's heart, that was not the only reaction Mark records. He tells us that Jesus' words provoke the scribes to begin questioning him in their hearts, saying, "Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (vv. 6-7).

Now, these are the right questions to ask. After all, the Old Testament does make clear that God alone can forgive sins. The reason for this is because sin is sin because it is an offense against God and his commands. This doesn't mean we can't sin against another. We can. But what makes that sin is that you've defied what God commands of you. And, therefore, he alone can forgive. This is what David recognizes when after sinning against Uriah, he focuses his confession on his sin before God alone (Psalm 51). So, as the scribes ask these questions in their heart, they're rightly recognizing the weighty claim Jesus is making.

But notice—and this is crucial—that the scribes don't say anything out loud. Mark tells us that they'd just been asking these questions to themselves, "in their hearts." In other words, no scene had to come of this. But Jesus wants to make an issue of it. He addresses it before the crowd. We're told, "And immediately Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they thus questioned within themselves, said to them, 'Why do you question these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, take up your bed and walk?'" (vv. 8-9).

Now, the particular wording of this question is interesting, isn't it? The harder thing to *do* is obviously to forgive sins. That's why only God can do it. But the harder thing to *say* is, "Rise, take up your bed, and walk." The obvious reason being that no one knows whether a person's sins are actually forgiven, whereas if you say, "Rise, get up, and walk," and someone isn't able to do those things, then it's pretty easy to prove your words of healing were powerless. And therefore, Jesus tells them that he'll add to what he's already said ("Your sins are forgiven") by telling this man additionally to "Rise, take up his bed, and walk." And the specific reason he wants to do this is so *that* they might see that he has the authority to forgive sins. That's explicitly what he notes, saying, "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home" (vv. 10-11). And Mark tells us, "And he rose and immediately picked up his bed and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We never saw anything like this!'" (v. 12).

The reason I said that it's important to note that Jesus himself is the one who makes this a public issue is because it's obvious that Jesus wants a point to be known and seen by all. He wants everyone to see that he has the authority to forgive sins. The heading in our ESV Bibles is probably something like: "Jesus Heals a Paralytic." But that's not actually the headline. In fact, Jesus does that lesser thing—healing—simply to show that he has the authority to do the greater thing—forgive sins. But why is Jesus so eager to illustrate that he has the authority to forgive sins that he brings out before the crowd this issue that the scribes had only been thinking about in their hearts? There's only one solution. Jesus, knowing that only God can forgive sins, wants to testify in front of the scribes and the rest of the crowd that he indeed is God. He is God the Son. After Mark has shown us everyone else testifying to Jesus' identity, Jesus wants us to see that this is something he claims for himself as well.

If this isn't what he wanted to suggest, then he would have handled it differently. Imagine he's just a good, godly man. Perhaps he's just a faithful prophet. Well, no faithful, godly prophet would ever want to detract from God's glory or suggest that he is able to do what only God can do. In the Scriptures, when angels, for example, are worshiped, they rebuke the worshiper, refusing to receive the worship and instructing them only to worship God. Jesus, if he were merely a good, godly prophet, having known what they were thinking in their hearts, would have said, "No, don't be confused. I'm not claiming that I personally have the authority to forgive sins. That power belongs to God alone who will share his glory with no man. I'm merely a mouthpiece for God" (or something to that end). But he doesn't. He wants them to know clearly that he has the authority to do the very thing that everyone knows only God can do. And the only way he'd have such authority is if he were himself God—God the Son. That's what he's claiming. That's why he made this a deal. This is Jesus attesting to his identity before the crowds.

Oftentimes it is said by those who are skeptical of Christianity that though many around Jesus claimed that he was divine, Jesus never claimed that for himself. Brothers and sisters, there is no other way to interpret what Jesus does right here except to understand that Jesus is attesting to his divinity. He is saying, "I am God the Son."

Why is this a big deal? For one, only God can save us. And if Jesus is going to save us, then he must be God. He must be the God-man. And it's also a big deal because that means that Jesus of Nazareth—the God-man—is our judge. After all, it is God, our Creator, before whom we will stand and give an account on that final day. This means that the one who lived, died, and was raised for us to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life is the very one before whom we will stand in judgment. There's no better news than that. And let me show you more of what this means.

This past week thousands of Syrian Christians died in only a matter of days. Some estimates I saw suggested that 7,000 Christians may have been martyred in only a couple of days' time. But even if that figure is exaggerated, it's at least a few thousand. A few thousand people chose to die rather than deny Christ as Lord. Islamic militants murdered Christians in excruciating ways, even posting videos online. Syrian Christians have even died in the form that our Lord did, by being crucified.

In the world's eyes, it looks like we're losing. And persecution is effective. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Christians in an area can be wiped out entirely. North Africa used to be the hotbed of Christianity in the first few centuries, and now it's become the 10/40 window. That's entirely because of persecution.

And yet, because Jesus is God the Son, those very Syrian believers, the second they shut their eyes in this life, opened them in the life to come. Their death was gain for them. They were with their Lord, Jesus Christ. And one day Jesus will come to avenge his people and vindicate his name, and the very one—Jesus—whom men have railed against will be recognized as the Lord and Judge of all. In other words, Jesus' claim here makes every sacrifice we make worth it.

Brothers and sisters, we've not created some grand lie to comfort us in hard times. Jesus really did walk out of that tomb alive. And he really does have the authority to declare our sins are forgiven because he really is the God-man. And because that's true, it's worth us serving him with our lives, even to death if necessary, because the God-man before whom we'll stand in judgment has already said to us, "Your sins are forgiven." And he has the authority to do that. So let's give thanks to him now as we come to the table. Amen.