

## “Rediscover Jesus: Faith and Dirty Fingernails”

Dr. Jay Howell

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*When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, “Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so 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, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”*

*Mark 2:1-12*

We continue in this series “Rediscover Jesus,” looking at the first couple of chapters in the Gospel of Mark, the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. What we’re hoping will be evident each week is that in every teaching, every healing, every miracle, Jesus is showing us something about who he is and what it means to follow him, and that no matter where you may be in a life of faith, he’s never finished showing you something. So the invitation is to discover, rediscover Jesus.

For the most part, we’ve been going bit by bit through these early chapters, but two weeks ago Tom Tewell covered two separate healings, so last week we covered the small part sandwiched between those healings. This week, though, we pick up at the beginning of Mark’s second chapter, when the amazing faith of some friends lead to healing and forgiveness. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

What good is a hole in the roof? Almost sounds like that old saying, “I need that like I need a hole in the head,” or “I need this like I need a root canal.” Kind of sounds similar to say, “I need this like I need a hole in the roof.”

Because really, when is a hole in the roof ever a sign that something good is happening? How would you see it? If you’re in a house and you went up into the attic and saw a small hole in the roof, or if you’re in an apartment or a condo and you saw a tiny hole in the ceiling, maybe looking up into the upstairs neighbor’s living room, how would you react? Call the landlord? Call the roofer? At the very least, you’d say it was a problem, one

that requires immediate attention unless you wanted to pay dearly down the road. That's how we see a hole in the roof. Funny how we look at things like that.

It started in this house many years ago in Capernaum with just a few pieces of dirt and straw starting to fall down. The room was crowded with people, crowded around this traveling teacher and healer who had come back into town and set up shop in this simple home. He was in there teaching, sharing a word of God's kingdom, God's new reality breaking forth into the world, when someone in the room felt something tap them lightly on top of the head. Their hand goes up to the top of their head, pulling down a small piece of dirt. They look up, not knowing what to expect, but not seeing anything else. They look back down at this teacher.

Then someone next to them feels a few more pieces of dirt and straw fall down on their head and their shoulders. They look up, and they can see that there's more than just a few pieces starting to fall down from one particular spot in the roof. Another person nearby notices the same thing, and then one by one heads start to tilt upward looking at this spot in the roof that seems to be shedding its skin.

Now it's definitely a thing. Folks in the room aren't looking at this traveling teacher anymore. They're distracted, looking up at this spot in the roof. Then they catch a glimpse of the end of finger breaking through the roof. Then a whole hand. Then a whole arm. Then more than one arm. And every time the fingers and the hands and the arms pull back, they see flashes of daylight breaking through the roof in small glimmers. Then the fingers and the hands and the arms start pulling back larger chunks of the roof, clawing at the straw and the mud and the plaster, until a larger hole starts to emerge. They don't know where this is heading; they just see the hole getting bigger and bigger. They start to see the silhouettes of faces, heads, and torsos, hard to see more than that because of the sunlight shining in behind them, but then those heads and torsos and hands and arms disappear momentarily, only to come back into view, this time holding on to a simple mat, lowering that mat through the hole they had dug in the roof.

As the mat got lower and lower, they saw that there was a man on it, and finally the four men on the roof lower that mat all the way to the ground, there in this crowded room with this traveling teacher and healer.

And there it is. With dirt and straw and sticks strewn all around the floor of this simple home, sunlight piercing through the now dusty room, everyone in unison it seems sees the man on the mat in the middle of the floor, and then turns their heads upward to the hole in the roof, looking at these four out of breath men crouched over the hole, dripping sweat down into the room.

If that was what you were looking at, what would that look like to you?

Well if you were one of the crowd, one of the other people crowded into that small house, you'd look up through the dust and the dirt at that hole in the roof, and you'd think, the nerve of these guys. We've had to wait in line and crowd in here. Who are they to cut ahead?

Or what if you're the person whose house this actually is. You're looking at the mess on your floor and the hole in your roof. You look up and see these guys and you think, "Who do you think you are, digging a hole in my ceiling?"

Or what if you were the scribes who were in there, you know the ones who in a minute are going to call Jesus out for his presumption, accuse him of blasphemy. You look up into the hole in the roof and you think, "Well this was rather unpleasant. And why aren't these guys coming to us for help?"

Or what if you were one of the disciples there with Jesus. You look up at this hole in the roof and you think, “We tried to tell him. He just can’t come into these towns anymore. People cram in, and then people start digging holes in the ceiling. This all could have been avoided.”

Or what if you were the paralytic? Now lying there on the floor in the middle of everyone. Everyone there is either staring at you or staring up at the hole in the roof. Maybe you’re embarrassed. Maybe you’re scared. But you yourself are looking up at the hole at your four friends up there, these friends who had tried to take you through the front door, but they couldn’t, these friends who instead lifted you up on to the roof of this place, these friends who dug through the dirt and the straw and the clay to lower you down, just on the chance that this Jesus could do something for you. And now you’re there in that room, and if you’re honest you’re just too overwhelmed to even begin to be thankful. So you look up at your friends, and the only thing that comes to mind is, “This was a big mistake.”

Frozen in that one moment were a bunch of people looking up into a hole in the roof at the four men who had just dug through the straw and dirt and clay to lower down their friend. And it’s not too big a stretch to imagine they’re looking up with any number of things on their mind, a lot of them not flattering.

But then one more person looked up, through the dirt and the clay, through the dusty sunlight, looked up at the four men peering down from the roof. And when he saw them he didn’t see presumption, like the crowd. He didn’t see vandalism, like the homeowner. He didn’t see consequences of bad planning, like the disciples. He didn’t see unpleasantness, like the scribes. He didn’t even see a mistake, like the paralytic.

Instead this last man in the room looked up at the four panting, sweating, desperate, exhausted men who had clawed through mud, straw, and clay, standing there now with dirt in their fingernails looking downward to see what might happen next, on the chance that there was something that could be done to help their friend, and he saw faith. He saw faith.

Jesus then turns to the man on the floor on his mat and tells him, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” And after a bit of back and forth with the scribes in the room, he turns again to the man on the floor and tells him to get up, pick up his mat, and go home, and the man does.

It doesn’t really follow the formula that we might be used to. If you’re familiar at all with the Protestant tradition in the Christian faith, then you might be familiar with the phrase “by faith alone,” which is this doctrine, this core teaching that salvation comes not by anything we might do or earn for ourselves but rather by faith in the one who gave himself for that salvation, Christ our Lord—the main point being, it is *your* faith that is the key component there.

But here, at least in terms of this healing, it doesn’t seem to go that way. Now I don’t think this deconstructs 500 years of Protestant theology or how we consider, say, what the Apostles Paul says about faith and salvation and forgiveness. But when it comes down to it, what does Jesus see that leads him to turn to the man on the floor, proclaiming forgiveness? Was it the paralytic’s faith? No. It says, when he saw *their* faith, meaning the faith of the men on the roof, the faith that led them to carry their friend to this Jesus when they heard he was back in town, the faith that led them to lift their friend up on the roof when the house was so crowded they couldn’t get through, the faith that led them to dig and claw a hole through the mud and straw and clay, the faith that led them to lower their friend down in the middle of this stunned crowd, full of their neighbors and acquaintances, to do this outrageous thing, all on the chance, just the chance, that the rumors about this Jesus were true and that he could do something for their friend, when Jesus saw *that* faith, *that’s* when he turns to the man on the floor and forgives him.

It's kind of surprising, isn't it, that Jesus would operate this way. Dole out forgiveness and healing based on the outrageous faith of a few friends. A lot of times we tend to think of forgiveness or salvation or healing as more of a personal thing, something to be handled between us and God individually. But here it's the faith of the man's friends that brings about his healing.

Do you think Jesus still works that way sometimes?

Because let's face it. There are some folks who just aren't coming through the front door. Could be because they don't want to, could be because the last thing they'd be caught doing is darkening the door of a house leading to Jesus. Could be because they can't, could be because of some sense of embarrassment or shame that they couldn't bear the thought of entering a house where Jesus was. Could be because others aren't letting them, could be because those others have other ideas of whose turn it is or whose right it is that they block the door for anyone else to come in. There are some folks who just aren't coming in through the front door, and so they end up in the crowd around the house, desperately in need of a healing word, and the only way it seems that they would get to it is if someone said, "I don't know if this is going to work, but we're not going to just stay here," and they lift them up, carry them over, and dig through the mud and straw and clay just on the chance that it could bring a healing word.

Maybe you're the one who feels like you can't come in through the front door, like church or faith or whatever you want to call it always felt a world apart, unwelcoming to you. Odds are folks who feel that way aren't here, but it could be you this morning.

Or maybe you know someone who feels like they can't come in through the front door, who would need friends who love them willing to claw and scrape and dig through the dirt just on the chance that some healing, some forgiveness might come of it.

Do you believe that Jesus still works that way?

Twenty years ago, a firefighter named Jay Jonas had led a squad into a burning building in New York. They got as far as they could, saving as many as they could, but soon they heard a series of thundering crashes as the building collapsed on top of them. Jonas and his men miraculously were not killed when the tower fell, but they were trapped, unable to move, paralyzed you might say.

Jonas put out a mayday call on his radio, not knowing how long it would be before someone could get to them in all the debris and steel and concrete. After giving what information he could about his location, the response came back, "I'm coming for you, brother." And later described it as a whole army of his brothers coming to find a way through the steel and concrete and smoke and fire and mud and straw and clay, just on the chance that they could make a way big enough to bring their friends to deliverance.

Do you believe that Jesus still works that way? I do. I believe that our Lord has always been at work through the outrageous faith of friends willing to do anything to bring a word of healing.

You see while everyone else was looking up at that hole in the roof in that house in Capernaum, these four men were looking down. They were looking down into the hole they had dug, down into a huddled crowd of people in a dusty house into which they had lowered their friend. And they saw someone they loved. Yes, I do believe Jesus still works that way.

That could be you on the roof.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.