

Wanted: Stretcher Bearers

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Published and distributed by
Thru the Bible Radio Network
P.O. Box 7100
Pasadena, California 91109-7100
(800) 65-BIBLE
www.ttb.org

Scripture references are from the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.

And again he entered into Capernaum after some days; and it was reported that he was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door; and he preached the word unto them. And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, who was borne by four. And when they could not come near unto him for the crowd, they uncovered the roof where he was; and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed in which the sick of the palsy lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins are forgiven thee. But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only? And immediately, when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Which is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy), I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. And immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion. (Mark 2:1-12)

Look at this verse again: “When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins are forgiven thee” (Mark 2:5)! Do you see something remarkable in it? “When Jesus saw *their* faith....” This verse, when I began my ministry, was a source of disturbance to me. It seemed to contradict what I had been taught, what I was preaching, and what I believed with all my heart – that a man, in order to be saved, must himself put his confidence and faith in Jesus Christ. It is something that no one else can do for you. It is not something that can be done vicariously; you, personally, must do it. It is wonderful to have a Christian mother, but you can never go to heaven tied to your mama’s apron strings. You yourself must exercise faith. Personal faith must be on your part a decision that *you* have made for Jesus Christ.

However, this verse seems to contradict all that. This verse seems to say that when Jesus saw *their* faith (not the faith of the palsied man, but of the four men who brought him in) He saved him. This verse, which once was a cause of disturbance to me, has in recent years become one of the most thrilling incidents in the life of our Lord. To see this, we will have to move back in the story.

Capernaum, City of Choice

It was at the very beginning of the ministry of our Lord. He had moved His headquarters to Capernaum. And as far as I can tell, He never removed them from that place. In fact, He pronounced upon Capernaum His worst judgment because they were the ones who had seen His mighty works more than in any other place.

One of the miracles He performed at Capernaum was to heal a leper. And when He healed the leper, He said to him, “I don’t want you to tell anybody about this. I want you to keep this to yourself. You must go show yourself to the priest according to the law, but you must not tell anyone else about it.”

That may seem to be a very strange procedure on the part of our Lord, but He did it on many occasions. I think that there may have been two reasons why He didn’t want the leper to

tell anyone about his healing. The first reason is that He did not come to this earth just to be a thaumaturgist, a wonder worker. To perform miracles was not His mission nor His motive in coming to this earth. And so He played them down. The second reason is obvious when we see that this fellow went and told everybody about it, and when he did the crowds pushed in on our Lord. He was forced to retire from Capernaum because these crowds of people actually strapped Him, handcuffed Him, so that He could no longer continue His ministry there for awhile. He had to withdraw.

Now the record says that the healed leper began to publish it and to blaze it abroad. The best way to get out information is to publish it and to blaze it abroad. If you want to get word out, put it in the paper or put the announcement on radio. Publishing is telling out, getting the information out. And so this man did that, he published it.

Also it says that he “blazed it abroad.” He set a forest fire. And that is also a good way to get information out – set the place on fire! A few nights back, some juvenile delinquent (or adult delinquent) set a palm tree on fire just down the block from where we live. It’s amazing how you can get acquainted with the neighborhood when you’re all out there in your robes and pajamas! We were surprised at how many of our neighbors we’ve never met before. They came from everywhere. Setting a fire is a good way to get the information out.

Several years ago I was holding meetings at Prescott, Arizona. During the morning service, in a very facetious manner I said to the pastor, “You know, if we want to get a crowd, one of the things we can do is to set the place on fire.”

That night during the preaching service he was a little nervous. He began to move back and forth, but I went right ahead speaking. Finally he got up, went to the back of the building, then came back and interrupted me. He said, “Friends, we’re going to ask that you go out of the church in an orderly manner, because it’s on fire back there.”

And it was! The smoke was coming up over the pipes of the organ, and believe me, that church emptied in a hurry. By the time we got outside the fire engines were there with their sirens going. We were up on a mountain, and I think you could hear that siren for fifty miles around. People started coming from everywhere. The whole town came.

The Saturday before our services began we had been on the back page of the local papers. But on Monday we were on the front page! And that week the church was filled, beginning Monday night right on through. So now when I go to hold meetings I always urge the pastor to set the place on fire. It will draw folk in, I guarantee that!

So this healed leper blazed abroad the news. He told everybody! And I can understand his feeling in this matter. But the crowds came, and for a little while our Lord had to withdraw from Capernaum. For how long? We are not told.

No Obstacle Too Great!

But then Christ returned to Capernaum, for it was His headquarters. And we read:

And again he entered in Capernaum after some days; and it was reported that he was in the house. (Mark 2:1)

Notice it is *the* house. “The” in the Greek is an adjective, and it means a definite house, and a house that has been referred to before. If you go back into the first chapter of Mark, you will find that our Lord was in the house of Simon Peter. Later on we are going to see that something happened to this house. I think that one of the difficulties confronting the quartet of stretcher

bearers was that the house was Simon Peter's. I just can't imagine that man standing calmly aside, folding his arms and saying, "Fellows, take the whole roof off. It's all right with me." Not Simon Peter! I have a notion that he even threatened them with the police. It was his house.

The word got around that our Lord had come back to Capernaum and that He was at Simon Peter's house.

And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door; and he preached the word unto them. (Mark 2:2)

The crowds filled the house so that every entrance and every exit was blocked. They came to hear Him. What a privilege it must have been to have lived in the first century and to have heard the Lord Jesus Christ preach. I believe that those who lived at that time had the greatest privilege of any folk who have been on the topside of this earth. They had the privilege of hearing the Son of God expound the Word of God.

However, He said that you and I are actually in a more favorable position today than they were. He said that those who haven't seen Him are blessed even more than they were in that day because today you and I have a perspective of almost 2,000 years, and we have the Holy Spirit to teach us. Friends, I'm confident that we can see things that those men at that time missed. What an opportunity we have in these days in which we live! But there in Capernaum many were welcoming the opportunity of hearing Him, and the place was crowded.

And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, who was borne by four. (Mark 2:3)

Our attention is focused now on five men coming down the dusty road leading into Capernaum. Coming into this little town, we see a quartet of men carrying a stretcher. Lying on that stretcher is a man afflicted with palsy, and it is obvious that he could never get into the presence of Christ unless somebody carried him.

When these four stretcher bearers get to the house, they encounter a difficulty.

And when they could not come near unto him for the crowd, they uncovered the roof where he was; and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed in which the sick of the palsy lay. (Mark 2:4)

Immediately they were confronted with the fact that they couldn't get through the crowd that was there. Someone may ask, "Why didn't the people make way for this poor fellow?" It's difficult for you and me to conceive of how much suffering there was in that day, how many desperately ill and palsied people there were. And the crowd was hardened; they were not really concerned at all about this man on the stretcher. And, my friend, anywhere the gospel of Jesus Christ has not gone, you will find men and women immune and indifferent to suffering. They are hardened, and they care not for the suffering of another. Regardless of what you may think of the Christian faith, it has always been in the vanguard when hospitals and orphans' homes and places to ameliorate suffering have been built. It always has been that way. But these people were hardened to suffering and were not inclined to move over to let in a poor fellow with palsy.

This is the problem these four stretcher bearers face. They move back and reconnoiter. I've often wondered exactly what they did. I have tried to visualize it. If they did it like we do it,

like the church today does it, they would have appointed some committees to see about getting the man in.

Someone has defined a committee as a group of the unfit appointed by the unwilling to do the unnecessary. And someone else has said that a committee is made up of a group of people who individually and singly can do nothing, but together they can decide that nothing can be done. That's a committee. And I have a notion they did it that way. I think the stretcher bearers appointed a door committee, and the door committee went up, investigated, and came back with their report, "We can't get in the door." So that committee was dismissed. Then they had a window committee. The window committee came up, went all around the house, came back and said, "Boys, we can't get in the windows." That committee was dismissed. However, if you have enough committees, you will find one that will function. And so a committee was formed known as the roof committee. They came back and said, "The roof is our one chance. There's nobody up there, and we believe that we can take that roof off." And that's the way they did it. These four men set about getting this poor palsied man up to the roof.

Now you can imagine what must have gone on. Here is a great crowd in the house, in the windows, in the doors, and around the outside of the house. The Lord Jesus is inside teaching, He's expounding the Word to them. They are listening. Then they hear a commotion outside, and all of a sudden daylight breaks into the house, and then men's heads appear in the opening. They're puffing – this is a tremendous undertaking. Suddenly it looks like the sky opens up. Then there's a moment of darkness as they see something like a stretcher coming down into the room. These fellows have been busy. Oh my, how they've been concerned about getting that fellow into the presence of the Lord Jesus!

You can imagine what it did for the meeting in progress. We have no notion what the Lord was teaching on this occasion, but it came to a sudden halt. Let's be very frank about it. The meeting is over right now. You can well imagine what would happen in a church if down through the ceiling there came a man on a stretcher, and he was let down in front of the pulpit. The preacher might just as well quit preaching – the service would be over as far as the congregation is concerned.

And so that's what happened on this particular occasion. These four men were so concerned about getting their friend into the presence of Christ that they took off a roof to do it. But now, when they get him down into the presence of the Lord Jesus, I think they are embarrassed because they see that they have broken up the meeting. They were set on just one task, and that was to get this poor fellow to One who could help him. Now they've done it. Their job is over, and they look about abashed.

I have a notion there were some folk there in the crowd giving them some pretty dirty looks about this time. "Don't you fellows see what you've done? You've broken up the meeting. How can we go on with the service when you take off the roof? And now you've let down a man in the presence of this Teacher!" And so the four men look around sheepishly because they have intruded in this way.

Our Lord (I must interpolate here) must have looked at them and smiled – I'm almost sure that He did. The record says:

When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins are forgiven thee. (Mark 2:5)

However, it is not the faith of these four men that saved him. It is the faith of these men that brought a poor, palsied man into the presence of Christ where he could hear the Lord Jesus

say, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee." And our Lord now deals with him personally; the four men are dismissed. Let me repeat, it was not their faith that saved him, but it was their faith that got him into the presence of Christ.

Paralysis Problems Today

About us today there are multitudes of poor, palsied people. They are not going to hear the gospel unless somebody is interested enough and burdened enough to get at the corner of a stretcher and bring them in where they can hear the gospel. About us today there are people who are paralyzed by sin. How many on a Sunday morning are sleeping it off from Saturday night? They are not in church on Sunday. Every now and then we hear from one that comes to know Christ through our radio broadcast, but generally we give them a headache and they tune us out. They don't listen. They are paralyzed by sin.

Then there is another group of folk who are paralyzed by prejudice. They'll not be coming to my church or to yours. I used to play handball with a man who was a broker in my community. After I became pastor of a downtown church, he said to me one day, "Is that your name I see on that church?"

And I said, "Yes."

He said, "McGee, I didn't know that you were a fanatic."

And I said, "I really don't think I am."

"Well," he said, "I thought that's what the place was."

Then I asked him, "Is that the reason you haven't come to services there?" He admitted that it was. Prejudiced. How many people will never darken the door of a certain church because they are prejudiced, paralyzed by prejudice?

In my own family I have seen something of this. My dad never darkened the door of a church. He didn't like so-called church members, especially church officers, because of the way they had treated him. I was brought up in that atmosphere. That is one reason I am so much concerned about the witness people give with their lives today. I tell you, outside the church today there are multitudes of people paralyzed by prejudice, and they won't come in unless somebody is concerned enough to get at the corner of a stretcher and be willing to take off a roof if necessary to get them in where they will hear the gospel.

We need stretcher bearers. We need them desperately. Yet there are some folk who have not brought anybody to church with them in ten years. Is that all your influence is worth? Oh, friend, how you need to get burdened for the lost on the outside so that people who are paralyzed and palsied might get in where they can hear Jesus say, "Son, thy sins be forgiven thee." They are not going to hear it unless somebody gets at the corner of a stretcher. They're not coming unless somebody gets burdened.

You may feel unqualified because you have a problem of not knowing how to approach people. If you do, there is another avenue open to you; it is the avenue of prayer. I am convinced that more people are won by prayer than by any other method. Why don't you begin to pray about certain ones and lay hold of God for those? I believe that God will hear and answer your prayer when He sees you mean business in this matter.

First Things First

Now going back to the palsied man, notice how our Lord deals with him personally. He says to him, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee." The first thing that our Lord deals with is the sin

question in the man's life. This is the main question in the life of each of us today. The sin question has to be settled first. And He starts there.

But as He deals with the issue of sin, His enemies are sitting there criticizing. They don't speak out against Him, but they criticize within their hearts. "He doesn't need that any should testify of man, for He knows what is in man," and He knows what they are thinking. They are saying two things: "This man Jesus is committing blasphemy," and also, "Who can forgive sins but God only?"

Now they were wrong in their first conclusion; they were right in their second conclusion. In their first conclusion they said, "He is committing blasphemy." And I'm willing to say that if Jesus Christ was not God, then He blasphemed. When anyone today makes the statement that Jesus didn't claim to be God, it is because he just hasn't read the record. It's on every page of the Gospels. He claimed to be God. This is one instance. He said to the man, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." If He is not God, then He blasphemed. But I say to you, He is God, and therefore He did not blaspheme.

Then they said, "Who can forgive sins but God only?" They're right there. The fact of the matter is, theologically they are more right than the average church member is today on this matter of forgiveness. Most of us think that when God forgives sin it's because He is big-hearted and that all you and I have to do is just go and say, "I'm sorry. Forgive me," and that ends it. It's not that easy.

You and I don't have much trouble forgiving people. If you should step on my shoe and turn around and say, "Oh, forgive me," and I look down and I think (I'm Scotch), *It'll cost fifty cents to get the thing shined up again*, but I say, "I forgive you," that's easy. But, my friend, forgiveness from God's standpoint is an altogether different matter. He is the moral Ruler of this universe, and He cannot forgive sins without maintaining His holiness and without upholding His justice. He can't do it arbitrarily.

Do you think a criminal can go before a judge and say, "Judge, forgive me for my crimes"? Well, many a judge has disqualified himself and stepped down from the bench when his own relative or friend was due to come before him because he had personal feelings in the matter and might have handed down a partial judgment. He had to call in another judge to handle the case. Any judge who is forgiving crimes and ignoring the penalty demanded by law should be disbarred and relieved of his position. God is a righteous Judge. He cannot forgive sins unless the penalty is paid.

Also, my friend, sin in Scripture always involves debt. You see, you and I are debtors to God. Oh, how we are in debt to Him! And we can't pay. We come short of His glory.

Have you ever had a note come due at the bank? Have you gone down to your bank and said to the cashier, "I've got a note coming due tomorrow, and I want to ask you to forgive it"? Then did the cashier go and cancel the note and hand it to you with tears in his eyes and say, "Brother, it's forgiven"? Well, if you have a banker like that, let me know, because mine is not that kind of a banker. He's cold-hearted and cold-blooded, let me tell you.

A man went in to borrow some money from a bank, and the banker turned him down. After he had pled with him for some time, the banker said, "Well, I'll make you a proposition. I have a glass eye, and if you can tell me which is the glass eye, I'll lend you the money."

The fellow studied him a moment and then said, "It's your left eye."

"That's right," the banker said, "it is, and I'll let you have the money, but tell me how you knew."

The fellow said, "Well, that left eye has just a bit of human kindness in it – so I knew it was the glass one."

My friend, may I say to you today that God cannot arbitrarily forgive sins. It is only because the Lord Jesus Christ went to the cross and paid that penalty completely, adequately, and sufficiently that God can say, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee."

Now the Lord Jesus put another question to these men:

Which is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins are forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? (Mark 2:9)

Which is easier to do? Is it easier to say to this man, "Son, thy sins are forgiven," or to say to him, "Arise, take up your bed and walk"? And that is a question for you and me to answer today. Which is more difficult? I do not know. If I had been there and He had asked me the question, I'm confident that I would have had to shake my head and say, "I don't know." As far as I'm concerned, they are equally difficult or equally easy.

Only God can forgive sins, and only God can make him walk. That, my friend, is the reason they didn't answer. He had pushed them onto the horns of a dilemma. In effect Jesus said to them, "You say I blaspheme and that I'm not God. But you have to admit that if he does get up and walk, God will do it. And if God makes him walk, then God can forgive his sins. Therefore, I'm going to say to him, 'Get up, take up your bed and walk.'" The record tells us that immediately he took up his bed and walked. Had those men that day been honest skeptics, they would have fallen down before Jesus and, like Thomas, said, "My Lord and my God!"

Be a Stretcher-Bearer for Him

Friend, may I say to you in closing, only God can forgive sins, and *He* can do it only because of what Christ did on the cross. When God forgives your sins, you are going to get up and walk away from them. You're going to get up off that bed of paralysis and of defeat and of immorality, and you are going to walk away from it.

Some time ago a couple came in contact with me through radio. They were then living together as man and wife but were not married. They were making the rounds of the bars and had sunk to a very low level. But they began to attend the church I pastored, and a wonderful transformation took place. I had the privilege of uniting them in marriage – one of the loveliest ceremonies in which I have ever participated. You see, they got up and walked, which is the reason I knew that their sins were forgiven. They walked away from the old life. They walked away from that immorality. If He has forgiven you, you will walk away from your sin.

There was a man who began attending the church's midweek Bible study, driving in from quite a distance. He was an alcoholic and separated from his wife. What a wonderful change came about in that man's life! Soon both he and his wife were coming to Bible study. If you are on a bed of sin or discouragement or defeat and He says to you, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee," then you will rise up and walk away from it.

There are so many today who are paralyzed by sin or prejudice, who are on beds of defeat and discouragement. I have counseled with many recently and have had telephone calls even from those who say, "Life has become intolerable. I'm going to commit suicide." My friend, if you have received the forgiveness of God and have been made to walk, won't you now become a stretcher bearer for Him?