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# Jesus' Healing of a Paralyzed Man (Mark 2.1–12): A Quadrigal Reading

BARRY L. BLACKBURN SR.

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Peter J. Leithart recently authored a stimulating book encouraging Christian interpreters of scripture to emulate Jesus and his disciples' typological reading of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> Doing so, argues Leithart, would open the way for interpretations that are strikingly similar to the quadrigal method practiced by medieval theologians.<sup>2</sup> According to this method, the text was studied in such a way so as not only to understand its literal meaning (the *historia*), but also to see what it means for understanding Christ and the redemption he achieved (the allegorical meaning), how we should live (the tropological meaning) and the nature of our final heavenly estate (the anagogical meaning).

In this study of Mark 2.1–12, I would like to see how this approach might play out with a pericope from one of the Gospels. Readers are invited to draw their own conclusions as to the legitimacy and merit of such an approach.

## THE LITERAL MEANING

According to Mark 2.1–12, early in Jesus' ministry he forgave and healed a paralyzed man in the Galilean town of Capernaum. This notable event occurred as Jesus traveled around Galilee proclaiming the advent of the kingdom of God, healing the sick and exorcising demons. In fact, even this healing occurred in a house packed with people who were listening to Jesus preach (vv. 1–2). In Mark's larger story Jesus has already healed people and exorcised demons (Mark 1.21–34, 39–45), but in this account there are novel elements: Jesus is motivated to act on account of the faith of the paralytic and his four friends (v. 5),<sup>3</sup> he forgives the sins of the sick man (v. 5), the scribes on the scene charge him with blasphemy (v. 7), he perceives "in his spirit"<sup>4</sup> the unspoken objections of the scribes (v. 8), and in response he, as the Son of Man, claims the authority on earth to forgive sins and heals the paralytic as evidence (vv. 10–11).

There are, of course, elements that beg for clarification. Why does Jesus forgive the paralytic's sins? In none of Mark's other healing stories does Jesus do such. Does Jesus know that this man's paralysis was a punishment for some unspecified sins?<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, but the story itself doesn't say. This issue may be connected to another: What's the logic of Jesus' question in verse 9 ("Which is easier . . .")? What's the correct answer to this question? Is it easier to pronounce forgiveness because it can't be verified, whereas the efficacy of a healing command is obvious?<sup>6</sup>

1. Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis* (Waco: Baylor, 2009), esp. 35–40.

2. *Ibid.*, 207.

3. In Mark 1.40 a leper expresses confidence that Jesus can cleanse him, but the word *pistis* ("faith") does not appear in a miracle story until Mark 2.5.

4. *epignous . . . tō pneumati autou.*

5. E.g., St. Bede in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea—Gospel of Mark*, trans. William Whiston, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/catena2.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/catena2.html) (accessed December 10, 2010).

6. E.g., Pseudo-Chrysostom in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.



Is it easier to heal than to forgive, since the latter is God's prerogative?<sup>7</sup> Or, are the two pronouncements equally difficult because the man's paralysis is a punishment for his sins?<sup>8</sup> Thus he couldn't be healed unless first forgiven?

There are two aspects of this story that will be illuminated by the last chapters of Mark: it will be the scribes, along with the chief priests and elders, who will condemn Jesus, and precisely for blasphemy (Mark 14.1–2, 53, 63–64). Moreover, Jesus' cryptic statement about the "Son of Man" having authority on earth to forgive sins (Mark 2.10) will be clarified by Mark 13.26–27 and Mark 14.62, where Jesus claims to be the "one like a son of man" of Daniel 7.13–14, who is described as coming with the clouds of heaven before God, who conferred upon him authority over all peoples, nations and languages.

All in all, the main contours of the story are reasonably clear: (1) Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, was an effective and magnetic preacher and miracle worker, attracting large crowds; (2) for Jesus there was an integral relationship between his preaching of the kingdom and his healings and exorcisms; (3) Jesus offered his miraculous help to those with faith, i.e., confidence that he could give them the health they desperately needed; (4) the scribes were persistent enemies of Jesus; and (5) Jesus claimed and exercised the authority to forgive sins.

### THE ALLEGORICAL MEANING

In light of the ministry of Jesus and the birth of the church, the story of the forgiveness and healing of the paralytic is a picture in miniature of the redemptive work of Christ. You and I were the lame man, helpless and paralyzed by our sins. In the eleventh/twelfth century, St. Theophylact of Ochrid said it well: "If therefore I, having the powers of my mind unstrung, remain, whenever I attempt any thing [sic] good without strength, as a palsied man, and if I be raised up on high by the four Evangelists, and be brought to Christ, and there hear myself called son, then also are my sins quitted by me; for a man is called the son of God because he works the commandments."<sup>9</sup>

Thus the story of the healing of the paralytic invites us to see analogies between this one historical vignette and Christ's redemption of humanity. The condition of the paralytic obviously invites comparison to our fallen condition apart from Christ. The (probably) Irish author of an eighth-century commentary on Mark saw in the paralytic's palsy "a type for the time when he lies in the softness of the flesh, though having the desire for salvation."<sup>10</sup> Earlier, St. Augustine spoke of all sinners as suffering from an inward paralysis.<sup>11</sup> St. Bede saw in the paralytic's rising from his bed "the soul's rousing itself from carnal desires, in which it was lying in sickness."<sup>12</sup> In the gospel miracle stories, anyone receiving healing or deliverance from demons can be seen as a type of the sinner in need of the gospel, but this typology is even clearer in the case of the paralytic since Jesus explicitly forgives his sins.

As St. Theophylact noted, it's easy to see a typology between the paralytic's four friends who brought him to the Savior and the four Gospels, whose contents brought us, too, to the Lord.<sup>13</sup> The four evangelists not only brought us to the Lord for baptism, but continue to bring us near him as we read, ponder and adhere to their testimony.

The obstacles faced by the paralytic and his friends enable them to demonstrate the reality and strength of their trust in the healing power of Jesus. They face two impediments: the crowd and the roof. In the same way, there were obstacles to our baptism and even now there are things that interpose themselves between

7. E.g., St. John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Homily 29.1; St. Theophylact in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

8. E.g., St. Bede in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

9. As quoted in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

10. Pseudo-Jerome, *Expositio Evangelii secundum Marcum*, trans. Michael Cahill, *The First Commentary on Mark* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41.

11. *On the Psalms* 41.4.

12. St. Bede in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

13. St. Theophylact in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.



us and intimacy with the Lord. For St. Theophylact the roof typifies the “intellect, which is set above all those things which are within us [i.e., within our human constitution].” The tiles of the roof, made of clay, signify the earthly things that cloud and distort our mind, “but if these be taken away, the virtue of the intellect within us is freed from its load” and is thus humbled so as to make us ready to come to Christ for salvation.<sup>14</sup>

When the paralytic is lowered before Jesus, the Lord saw his faith and that of his friends. Moreover, this observation leads the Savior to say, “Son (*teknon*), your sins are forgiven” (v. 5). Here is a beautiful picture of the *ordo salutis*: our faith in Jesus Christ is met with adoption as children by God and forgiveness of our sins. That this adoption as a child of God is inextricably linked to forgiveness of sins, St. Bede saw clearly: “But Christ’s wonderful humility calls this man, despised, weak, with all the joints of his limbs unstrung, a son, when the priests did not deign to touch him. Or at least, He therefore calls him a son because his sins are forgiven him.”<sup>15</sup>

Our faith in Christ, however, not only results in forgiveness but also in a progressive healing of our souls. We not only need deliverance from sin’s guilt, but also from its power over our weakened, lame souls. For Clement of Alexandria, “the paternal Word is the only . . . physician of human infirmities, and the holy charmer of the sick soul.”<sup>16</sup> As the divine Wisdom, the Word “frees the soul from passion,” thus regulating our souls “by wisdom and temperance.”<sup>17</sup> That the paralytic, being healed, is able to take up his bed is a picture of what Jesus has and is doing for us: “He not only turns away souls from sin, but gives them the power of working out the commandments” (St. Theophylact).<sup>18</sup>

The scribes who hear Jesus forgive the paralytic’s sins are shocked and in their hearts they accuse him of blasphemy (vv. 6–7), as only God has the authority to forgive sins (see Exod 34.6–7; Ps 103.3; 130.4; Isa 43.25; 44.22). This objection, however, emanates from the scribes’ ignorance that Jesus is the divine Word of the Father become flesh. As such, Jesus has the power to perceive the secret thoughts of their hearts (v. 8). Thus St. Bede concludes that “Christ is proved to be very God, for He is able to remit sins as God.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, continues Bede, “the Arians err . . . madly, who although overwhelmed with the words of the Evangelist, so that they cannot deny that Jesus is the Christ, and can remit sin, nevertheless fear not to deny that He is God.” In a similar vein, St. Chrysostom observes: “The scribes asserted that only God could forgive sins, yet Jesus not only forgave sins, but showed that he had also another power that belongs to God alone: the power to disclose the secrets of the heart.”<sup>20</sup>

When Jesus demonstrated his power to forgive sins by making the lame man walk, it’s fitting that the Savior claimed this prerogative as Son of Man “upon the earth” (v. 10). This phrase, says the author of a commentary incorrectly assigned to St. Chrysostom, shows that the *logos* “has joined the power of the divinity to the human nature by an inseparable union, because although He was made man, yet He remained the Word of God; and although by an economy He conversed on the earth with men, nevertheless He was not prevented from working miracles and from giving remission of sins. For his human nature did not in any thing [sic] take away from these things which essentially belonged to his Divinity, nor the Divinity hinder the Word of God from becoming, on the earth, according to the flesh, the Son of Man without change and in truth.”<sup>21</sup>

14. Ibid.

15. St. Bede in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

16. St. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 1.2, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, [www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.i.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf02.i.html) (accessed December 10, 2010).

17. Ibid.

18. St. Theophylact in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

19. St. Bede in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*; cf. St. John Chrysostom, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*.

20. St. Chrysostom, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, Homily 29.1. Eng. trans. provided by Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, *Mark* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, 2; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 28.

21. Pseudo-Chrysostom in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.



When Jesus commanded the paralytic to rise, the man “gets up.” This phrase is a translation of the Greek word *ēgerthē*, a word used in the New Testament to describe our resurrection in baptism.<sup>22</sup> Thus this word creates a wonderful bridge between this particular healing story and what happens to us all when Christ forgives our sins and bestows on us the Holy Spirit.

When the crowd saw the former paralytic rise, take up his bed, and walk, they exclaimed in great amazement, “We have never seen anything like this!” Jesus had done a new thing. Allegorically, then, this miracle points to the new creation: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old has passed away; look, the new has come” (2 Cor 5.17). Though the consummation of salvation has not yet come, yet through the gospel of Christ, we already belong to the new creation.

In light of what the story of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic signifies concerning Christ and his saving work, it is altogether fitting that the event occurs in Capernaum, a name that means “House of Comfort.”<sup>23</sup> It is in union with the risen Christ that we have received the Holy Spirit, the Comforter (John 14.26; 15.26; 16.7–15), through whom God comforts us in all our affliction (2 Cor 1.3–4; cf. Acts 9.31). The same Spirit in which Christ knew the thoughts of the scribes, is the comforting Spirit which he shares with us.<sup>24</sup>

### THE TROPOLOGICAL MEANING

Just as the residents of Capernaum crowded into and around the house where Jesus was preaching the word of the kingdom, so much so that the paralytic’s friends had to resort to extreme measures, so Christians today should make every effort to avail themselves of the message of Christ. Whether by reading or listening to the Holy Scriptures in private or by going to church, where the scriptures are read and preached, we will be wise to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col 3.16).

The example of the paralytic’s four friends speaks eloquently about the necessity for believers to practice neighbor love. The friends so loved the lame man that they took extreme measures to get him into the presence of the Savior.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the love of Christ must so inflame us that we will bring our needy friends into the presence of the Savior so that he might heal and save their souls and bodies. Our love for others will not allow us to observe those around us drowning in depression, in sickness, and in sin without lowering them to the feet of Jesus. It must have been both difficult and embarrassing (and perhaps even dangerous!) for the four friends to get the paralytic up on the roof and then down through a hole in the same, but love for their friend drove them to it. Let that same love inhabit us so that we, too, will take our friends to the Savior.

That Jesus first offered the paralytic the forgiveness of his sins teaches us, according to John Calvin, that we should be more concerned about our sins than our physical infirmities. Thus we must order our prayers aright: first seek to be reconciled to God through forgiveness, and only then ask for the alleviation of illness and pain.<sup>26</sup>

When Jesus healed the paralytic he modeled the command that he gave to us: “[L]et your light shine

22. Col 2.12; 3.1.

23. Origen in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea Gospel of Matthew 17:24–26*; St. Theophylact in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*.

24. For a Trinitarian reading of the *tō pneumati autou* in v. 8 see John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, vol. 1, trans. William Pringle (Matthew 9.1–8; Mark 2.1–12; Luke 5.17–26), [www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.i.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom31.i.html) (accessed December 20, 2010).

25. Luke’s account (Luke 5.17–26) emphasizes this fact: the friends “were trying to bring him [the paralytic] in and lay him before Jesus” (v. 18, my emphasis). Eventually they were able to “let him down . . . into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus” (v. 19).

26. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*: “Thus it appears that this is a frequent and ordinary way of speaking in the Scriptures, to promise the pardon of sins, when the mitigation of punishments is sought. It is proper to attend to this order in our prayers. When the feeling of afflictions reminds us of our sins, let us first of all be careful to obtain pardon, that, when God is reconciled to us, he may withdraw his hand from punishing.”



before (*emprosthen*) others, so that they may see your good works and give glory (*doxasōsin*) to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5.16). As a result of Jesus’ gracious, powerful command, the lame man walked off in front of (*emprosthen*) all, thus provoking the onlookers to glorify God (*doxazein ton theon*, v. 12). Let us therefore follow in the steps of our light-bearing master so that our God will receive the praise he so completely deserves.

### ANAGOGICAL MEANING

The story of Jesus’ healing of the paralytic not only reverberates with meaning as to Christ and his redemptive work and as to our conduct as believers, but pushes forward to the *eschaton*. Christ is the Savior of the whole person, body as well as soul. So agreed St. Clement of Alexandria: “For a while the ‘physician’s art,’ according to Democritus, ‘heals the diseases of the body; wisdom frees the soul from passion.’ But the good Instructor, the Wisdom, the Word of the Father, who made man, cares for the whole nature of His creature; the all-sufficient Physician of humanity, the Saviour, heals both body and soul.”<sup>27</sup> The miraculous healing of the paralytic forcibly directs our attention to the future when all the lame will walk. This story teaches our hearts to anticipate with ecstasy the day spoken of by Isaiah so long ago: “Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy” (Isa 35.5–6; cf. 29.18). At the resurrection of the dead God will save us “on the outside” just as he has already been saving us “on the inside.” It is therefore fitting that the paralytic is described as “getting up” with the word *ēgerthē*, a word often used in the NT to denote resurrection from the dead.<sup>28</sup> Instead of *egeirō*, Luke uses *anistēmi* (Luke 5.25), but this word, too, is used elsewhere to denote resurrection.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the crowd’s response, “We have never seen such”(v. 12), portends the splendor and beauty of the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21.1, 5). As Paul affirmed with joy, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, [is] what God has prepared for those who love him” (2 Cor 2.9).

### CONCLUSION

The foregoing manner of interpretation will seem strange to those of us who were taught that “the pearl of great price” is authorial intention, for whose acquisition all else is to be jettisoned. However, it can be argued with cogency that such a constriction of meaning was initiated by a Protestant reaction to medieval Catholic interpretation, which was then greatly exacerbated by the Enlightenment’s project of “liberating” scriptural texts from their ecclesiastical overlords by using the “author’s meaning” to dissolve canonical unity and to set the text over against the church and its dogmas. In this way, for example, Jesus was removed from the Old Testament.

What if, however, biblical texts are hospitable to additional meanings as the triune God continues to reveal himself and his purposes to the world? Had the human authors of scripture suddenly become privy to the fullness of God’s revelation, surely they would have seen analogies between the narratives and discourses that they constructed and the future unfolding of God’s saving acts. Their stories and sayings would have suddenly overflowed with additional meanings. We, on the other hand, can study the ancient texts in light of the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and when we do so we are bound to see a richness and bounty always known by God, of course, but occluded from earlier human eyes.

Thus the story of Jesus’ healing of a paralytic one day in Capernaum becomes a multi-faceted gem, which not only reflects one event in the Lord’s earthly life, but, viewed from other angles, reveals other,

27. St. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 1.4, trans. Oden and Hall, *Mark*, 28.

28. E.g., Matt 12.26; 14.2; 16.21; 17.9; 26.32, 34; 27.52, 64; 28.6, 7; 1 Cor 15.15–16, 29, 32, 35, 52.

29. E.g., Matt 17.9; Mark 8.31; 9.9–10, 31; 10.34; 12.25; 1 Cor 15.51; 1 Thess 4.14, 16; Eph 5.14. Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, also saw a link between Jesus’ healings and the *eschaton*: just as the healing of the paralytic demonstrates the reality of Jesus’ words of forgiveness, so the resurrection of our bodies will demonstrate the present “efficacy of the Gospel for quickening men”; cf. John 5.28–29.

complementary images: Christ's past and present redemptive work for the whole world, our present responsibilities as the redeemed, and the glorious future when we and our world reach our *telos*.

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