



Writings of W. Burney Overton

As I See It to Be

Lord, I Believe

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W. Burney Overton

I am Bartholomew. I met Jesus in a most unusual way. I didn't actually meet Him, but it was the only time I was in His presence—sort of. For weeks I had been hearing about Jesus—strange things—exciting things—things that made me long to be where He was. I wondered if they were true.

Had John, the baptizer, really taken second place to Him? Was it true what they said about His being the Beloved Son of God? And all those teachings and healings—it hardly seemed likely that a fellow Galilean would have such power.

But I knew old Issachar, the leper—not so old, but he had been a leper a long time and was old because of the disease. Issachar had defied the law and gone to Jesus, crying out, “If you will, you can make me whole,” and right there, they told me, Jesus touched him—touched a leper—and he was clean. Every sign of the hideous disease was gone, and old Issachar really spread the word of what had happened to him. And he gave all the credit to the power of Jesus.

When I saw Issachar, I didn't even recognize him at first. He wasn't old Issachar anymore. I was astonished at his youth, and even more astonishing story he told me about this man Jesus.

It was only a few days later that I heard that Jesus was back in Capernaum, and everybody was flocking to be where He was and to hear Him—and hoping maybe to see Him heal someone. I ran to the place where He was, but so many were there that I couldn't possibly get close enough to see Him. Each time I tried to push into the crowd, people cursed at me and pushed me back.

Finally, I gave up, and turned away feeling thoroughly helpless and unable to cope even with this situation. I was walking along the street—empty now, although it was usually a very busy street—and I came to the house of my friend Thaddaeus, the paralytic.

What a way to be identified! He and I and three others—James, Andrew, and Philip—had grown up together in Capernaum. We were inseparable—going to school, working, playing together. We hardly knew which home belonged to whom for we lived in them all as if each were our own.

We were teenagers and playing out in the hills one day when the accident happened. Thaddaeus fell from a tree. It didn't look like a bad fall, and, at first, we thought he was kidding us when he said his back was hurt and he couldn't get up.

That was eight years ago, and Thaddaeus had never taken another step. We continued to be close friends. The four of us took Thaddaeus with us everywhere we went. We had a pallet on poles to carry him so he was no real burden to us. Besides, we loved him and wanted to share everything with him, and this was one of the ways we could do it. But from the day of the accident, he was known in the city as Thaddaeus the paralytic.

It was really no surprise to me that James, Andrew, and Philip were already there. In fact, I felt a little guilty that I had gone off on my own to try to see Jesus instead of including them.

We began to talk about all the things we heard about Jesus, as we have done many times in the last few weeks. And, as always, we begin to speculate about whether it would be possible for him to heal Thaddaeus.

“Well, we aren’t going to find out today,” I said. “That crowd around Jesus won’t let anyone into the place where he is.”

“Maybe we will,” Philip said, “Let’s try anyway. We may not have another chance.” At first, James and Andrew agreed with me, but when Thaddaeus said in a quiet voice, “I wish we could,” we were all determined to do everything in our power to get him to Jesus.

I don’t know how to explain it, but, as soon as we had decided to take Thaddaeus to Jesus, I knew that we would get through and that Jesus would be able to heal him.

We set off to the house where Jesus was, carrying Thaddaeus on his pallet. We almost gave up when we saw the crowd outside the house. There seemed no way to get in. No one was going to step aside, not even for a crippled man.

We stopped on the edge of the crowd and were debating how best to proceed when Andrew, excitement blurring his voice, said, “I know how we can get Thaddaeus to Jesus. We can let them down through the roof.”

It was a preposterous idea. Getting Thaddaeus up on the roof was tough enough, but to break a hole in the roof big enough to let him down before Jesus—that was ridiculous. Besides that, the owner of the house would be furious, and the crowd in the house might well turn on us all

Again Thaddaeus made our decision for us, “What do I have to lose?”

We were successful beyond our wildest expectations. The owner wasn’t furious, and the crowd didn’t turn on us. When Jesus saw us, He stopped speaking to the crowd, motioned for them to make room, and waited quietly until Thaddaeus lay on the floor before Him.

I can’t really describe my feelings as I knelt on the edge of that hole in the roof and watched what was happening. There were some scribes from the synagogue there. They had been given places to sit. Even in such a crowd, people made way for them. They were watching too, to see what Jesus would do. Scowls of disapproval distorted their faces, but they neither intervened nor withdrew.

Jesus spoke directly to Thaddaeus, “My son, your sins are forgiven.” I could not see His face, but I heard His voice and I’ll never forget the sound of it—so tender and loving and full of compassion—“My son, your sins are forgiven.”

I didn’t expect those words. I thought He might ask what had happened, or, just touch him and tell him he was healed. “My son, your sins are forgiven.”

The scribes stirred in their seats. They didn’t have to say anything for us to know what they were thinking, “Your sins are forgiven.’ Who can forgive sins but God alone? This is blasphemy. Who does Jesus think He is to be telling this man his sins are forgiven? And He said the words before all these witnesses. We have evidence against Him now.”

My eyes shifted back to Jesus when He began to speak again, this time directly to the scribes, “You question what I have said? What would you have me say to the paralyzed man—that I can’t help him—or rise and walk. Would that be better than your sins are forgiven?”

Jesus turned back to Thaddaeus, “The Son of Man does have authority to forgive sins. Take your pallet and go home,” and Thaddaeus did what Jesus told him to do—his first steps in eight years.

I was aware that the crowd made a path for Thaddaeus so he could go out of the house, but I was more aware of the silence, and of the looks on their faces. I don’t know what happened to James and Andrew and Philip, but I jumped down through the hole in the roof and stood before Jesus.

“Jesus, why did you do it the way you did?”

The look in His eyes matched the sound of His voice when he had called Thaddaeus, “My son.” “Bartholomew (I don’t know how he knew my name), come over here and sit down with me.” The crowd gave us room, but no one left the house. Jesus seemed not to be aware of them—only of me.

There was a note of deep sadness in His voice as He spoke to me, “Because,” He said, “It is so hard for them to believe,” and He sat in silence for some minutes.

I didn’t dare say anything. I waited.

“Each of us is the Son of Man and the Son of God. Each of us has authority to forgive sins. We need to forgive one another’s sins.” He paused again.

“When I saw the faith you and your friend had, I knew that Thaddaeus would be able to walk again. The scribes and the others in the room didn’t have that faith. They were skeptically waiting to see what I would do—or say—and the scribes especially were looking for a way to discredit me.” His voice trailed off to a whisper as He added, “and

all of us who are children of our father in heaven.”

He looked into my face and said, “Do you understand?”—and as much as I wanted to tell Him I did, I had to admit I did not.

“Bartholomew,” He said, “You’ve been brought up to obey the Law. You believe it. You fear it. You are controlled by it. The Law is good, but not when it destroys your ability to be alive. There is forgiveness, and mercy, and kindness, and love—and much more. But blind adherence to law blocks all these.

“You wanted Thaddaeus to be healed, and so did I, but more than that, I wanted all the people here to be healed.”

“Healed?” I asked. “Of what do they need to be healed?”

“Of their separation,” He replied, “of blind adherence to the law.”

“Can you heal them?”

“Not really, but I can participate in their healing, and so can you.”

“How?”

“By assuring them that they are forgiven. By encouraging them to forgive themselves—and to believe they are forgiven.”

“And will that heal them?”

“Yes, that will heal them of their separation from God.”

“I still don't understand.”

“Bartholomew, do you love Thaddaeus?”

“Of course. What does that have to do with forgiving sins, or healing people?”

“After the accident (I wondered how He knew about that) you might have decided you couldn't be bothered or burdened by a crippled person.....”

“I wouldn't have done that,” I interrupted.

“I know you wouldn't, but if you had, you and he would have been separated. You would not have forgiven him for being crippled.”

“I see that,” I said.

“If Thaddaeus had refused to believe that you loved him enough to be his friend, even though he was a cripple, you and he would've been separated. His refusal to forgive himself would bring it about.”

“That would frustrate me,” I said, “and all I could do would be to keep on forgiving him whether he accepted it or not.” I thought again at Jesus's words to Thaddaeus, “My Son, your sins are forgiven.” Whatever separates us from God and each other is sin. This separation is overcome by forgiveness, and the person is healed.

I sat in silence a long time, unaware of anything going on around me. Finally I looked up. Jesus had gone away and all the crowd with Him. I was left with my thoughts and my feelings.

My Son, your sins are forgiven.

Sin is separation from God and from each other.

All of us have authority to forgive sins.

If I believe I am forgiven, I am no longer separated from God and from those who love me. I am healed.

Lord, I believe.