



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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I am Bartholomew

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The assignment was to read the story of the healing of the paralytic, as told in Mark 2:1-12; to identify with one of the characters in the story; and to retell the story through that person's eyes, including a conversation with Jesus. The following is my version of the assignment.

I am Bartholomew. I met Jesus in the most unusual way. I didn't actual meet him, but it was the only time I was in his presence – sort of. For weeks, I had been hearing about him – 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 Jesus? Was it true what they said about Jesus 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. He gave all the credit to the power of Jesus.

When I saw Issachar after he was healed, I didn't even recognize him at first. He wasn't old Issachar anymore. I was astonished at his youthful appearance, and even more astonished at the 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 house where he was, but so many were there that I couldn't possibly get close enough to see him. Every time I tried to push into the crowd, people cursed me and pushed me back.

Finally, I gave up and turned away, feeling thoroughly helpless and unable to cope even with this situation. As I was walking along the street – empty now, although it was usually a very busy street – 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 all of them as if each were our own.

When we were teenagers, we were 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 that his back was hurt and that he couldn't get up.

He wasn't kidding. It was eight years ago that the accident happened, and Thaddaeus has never taken another step. However, we have continued to be close friends. The four of us took Thaddaeus with us everywhere we could. We made 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. 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 really was no surprise to me that James, Andrew, and Philip were already at the house. In fact, when I saw them, 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 had heard about Jesus, as we had done many times in the last few weeks. And as always, we began to speculate about whether it would be possible to get Jesus to heal Thaddaeus.

"Well, we aren't going to find out today," I said. "That crowd around Jesus won't let anyone into the house 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 all were 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 him down through the roof."

It was a preposterous idea. Getting Thaddaeus up on the roof would be 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 have I 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 didn't expect those words. I thought Jesus might ask what had happened, or might just touch Thaddaeus and tell him he was healed. But he said, "My son – your sins are forgiven." That's all. What did those words have to do with healing?

The scribes stirred in their seats, clearly uncomfortable. They didn't have to say anything for all of 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. We can bring him to trial."

My eyes shifted back to Jesus when he began to speak again, this time directly to the scribes. "You questions 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'?" They didn't answer him.

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. He took 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, 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 was afraid to. I just waited.

Jesus began to speak again. "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 friends 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, much as I wanted to tell him I did, I had to admit I did not.

"Bartholomew," Jesus 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 more to life than law or obedience to law. 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 was mystified. "Of what do they need to be healed?"

"Of their separation from God," Jesus 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 that will heal them?"

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

"I still don't understand."

"Bartholomew, do you love Thaddaeus?" Jesus was very patient with me.

"Of course. But I don't know what that has 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.

"Also, 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 have 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 of Jesus' words to Thaddaeus, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Whatever separates us from God and each other is sin. The separation is overcome by forgiveness, and then 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 alone with my thoughts and feelings.

Jesus' words echoed in my mind.

"My Son, your sins are forgiven."

"Sin is separation from God and from each other."

"When we forgive ourselves and each other, we overcome the separation."

"All of us have the authority to forgive sins. All of us are able to forgive sins."

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

"Lord, I believe."