

Context Always Enriches Content

# The Paralytic's *Amazing Friends*



Kingdom Care Insights  
for Individuals and Groups

**Doug Greenwold**

Author of *Making Disciples Jesus' Way*  
*Encounters with Jesus*



A Digging Deeper Faith Study

*Context rescues truth from the familiar.*

*– Kenneth Bailey*

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*When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know  
but do not always know what we see.*

*– Unknown*

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*There is no substitute for reading the Bible (in context);  
It throws a great deal of light on the commentaries!*

*– Unknown (added)*

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*If all the compassion of all the tender fathers in the world  
were compared with the tender mercies of God  
they would be but as a candle to the sun or  
a drop to the ocean.*

*– Matthew Henry*

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*We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have  
traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century.  
We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide*

*– Gary Burge*

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*Reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us  
of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.*

*– Phillip Jenkins*

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*The Bible writers assumed their readers lived when, where and how they did.  
They saw no reason to explain what everyone knew to be true.*

*– Randall Smith*

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*for Individuals and Groups*

Doug Greenwold

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*Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*

*The Rest of the Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages*

*Making Disciples Jesus Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*

*Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*

*Becoming a Judean Shepherd*

*That Good Samaritan*

*Those Prodigal Sons*

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## *Introduction*

My dream began to take shape and come into focus while I was playing college basketball in the Midwest. I envisioned twin sons, both being power forwards who would play at their dad's alma mater – the University of Michigan.

About this same time, my wife-to-be was completing her elementary education degree. As God would have it, she was placed in a classroom of Downs Syndrome children. That experience profoundly shaped her and gave rise to a new prayer in her life: "Lord, you can do whatever you want with my life, but don't ever let me have a child with retardation. I just won't be able to handle that!"

We married several years later; and subsequently, our first daughter, Mary, was born. Three years later a son arrived on the scene. We named him David Douglas, just in case he had some basketball genes in his makeup. Within a matter of weeks, I was already musing on what his future jump shot might look like.

Slowly, over the first years of his life, David's mental retardation, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities and what is now called Autism tendencies, emerged. By the time he was three, I knew it would be quite some time before he would ever hold a basketball, let alone shoot and score.

David brought us into the world of special needs. We were now traveling on different roads and down different paths than we had ever expected. And along the way, we discovered some remarkable people who were willing to make significant investments in the lives of people with disabilities.

In the year 2000 we discovered a relational ministry to kids with special needs called Young Life Capernaum. It was a God-send for David! The friends and "buddies" he and we encountered at "club" and "camp" were simply amazing people. They are in our Kingdom "Hall of Fame!" They remind me of the four friends in the Luke 5 passage – doing whatever it takes to bring young adults with special needs to Jesus.

Several years ago I wrote what I considered to be an extensive contextual Reflection on this Luke 5 encounter of Jesus with a paralytic. I thought I had dug deeply into that passage. But recently, God brought me back to it in order to show me more of "the rest of that story."

In January 2016, I was one of the invited speakers at Young Life's 75th Anniversary Celebration in Orlando, Florida. Another speaker, Louie Giglio, made the observation that when you come to Jesus you get a new identity. He referenced the paralytic in Luke 5 to make his point that Jesus did not address this paralytic with "cripple, your sins are forgiven." Rather He (stunningly) said, "friend, your sins have been forgiven." (emphasis added)

That insight blew me away. How had I missed it? And what else had I missed? Previously I had been so focused on Jesus in Luke 5 that I didn't "see" this passage from the perspective of the paralytic's four friends. And that's what gave rise to this book.

So for all of you "friends" and "buddies" who have befriended David through the years at the churches we attended, the Capernaum clubs and camps where he participated, as well as the staff and volunteers at his current Cornerstone Ranch home in McKinney, TX, this book is dedicated to you. These Reflections are written with great appreciation for the enormous investments you have made, not only in David's life, but in the lives with those he shares community.

Shalom, Shalom

Doug Greenwold  
Columbia, Maryland  
July 2016



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Jesus' forgiving and healing of a paralytic most likely takes place at Peter's mother-in-law's *insulae* (multi-room) house in Capernaum. The remains of this house lie beneath the Roman Catholic Church (looks like a flying saucer) in the left center of the picture. Note its proximity to the synagogue and the adjoining synagogue school (*Bet Midrash*). This is the site where a paralytic was lowered through the roof and placed in front of Jesus.

Geographically we are in the NW corner of the Sea of Galilee, looking south along the west shore. In the first century, Capernaum was estimated to be a port town of 7,500 people. Being adjacent to the International Highway, which hugs the western shore connecting Damascus with Egypt, made Capernaum particularly strategic – which is why Jesus based His Galilean ministry here. To date only about 5% of first-century Capernaum has been unearthed.

and

## *The Paralytic's Remarkable Friends*

*And behold, men bearing on a couch a man who was paralyzed, and they sought **Him** to carry him in and lay him before **Him**.*

– Luke 5:18 (*The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* – bold added)

Every time we enter Scripture we need to ask: **Where are we?** In Luke 5:18 we are in Capernaum, most likely at Simon Peter's mother-in-law's house – Jesus' home away from home. Verse 27a gives us a clue. More than a dozen cities/towns from around the Sea of Galilee shipped their commerce into Capernaum to transact with the International Highway – which is why we find Levi there.

Then we need to ask: **What's happened before that bears on this encounter?** Several items are noteworthy. Jesus has recently proclaimed His Messiahship and His "Rescue Manifesto" in Nazareth (Luke 4). He declared that the epicenter of His ministry will be bringing God's mercy and compassion to those who have been systematically deprived of it (see Chapter 3 "Mutiny on the Sabbath" in *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*). Most recently Jesus healed a person covered with leprosy which is why there are Pharisees and teachers of the law suddenly present to "check Him out" (verse 17).

In the Gospels we enter the world of Observant Judaism. That means we enter the world of the Rabbis who have been given the mantle to authoritatively interpret God's Word. And they have been very creative in their interpretations, which are binding on their

disciples. To illustrate, they have created categories of people for whom they know God doesn't like – Gentiles, prostitutes, tax collectors, tanners, lepers, shepherds, women who are barren, and people with disabilities and deformities. Thus the culture's response to these "sinners" was that if God doesn't like you, they would not like you either. In fact the more they shunned you, the more they felt they were honoring God. Talk about an upside-down "theological" system when it comes to compassion and mercy!

Being a paralytic in that culture meant that you were a person with a stigma. As a result, issues of rejection and exclusion would be a regular part of a paralytic's life. What is stunning in Luke's narrative is that this paralytic has any friends at all, let alone several loyal friends, friends so committed to him that they are willing to do whatever is required to bring him to Jesus. It also means that these friends are incredibly courageous – willing to defy/challenge the religious norms of their day. Furthermore, they are also willing to be publically identified with being a friend of a paralytic. How did this come to be? While Luke's narrative leaves us to wonder, reading between the lines suggests some possibilities.

My sense is it had to start with one person who was willing to take a risk. One person who was willing to stand against the prevailing paradigm of that religious culture. That begs the question: Why would someone do that? For starters, how did this person even come into contact with this unnamed paralytic? Might he have been his neighbor, or a member of his extended clan? And what did this man sense in the paralytic that initially drew him to interact with this "outcast," then to repeatedly visit him until a friendship was established?

As a father of a child with disabilities, I long ago learned there is something (refreshingly) different about many in that population. To be personal, our David (mentally and physically challenged) is totally without guile – he doesn't know how to be deceptive! Furthermore, David doesn't have a materialistic bone in his body. That frees him up to find joy in the simplest of things – a college football magazine. He has no problem saying "*help me, please*" – the last phrase we typical people want to utter!

With these kinds of qualities so different from our culture, you soon sense a different value system (more like the Beatitudes!) in many of those who journey through life with a disability. So I can understand why this man in Capernaum might have been drawn into developing a relationship with this paralytic. He may well have sensed something refreshingly authentic and humble about him. But how did others become his friend?

In John 1 Phillip approaches Nathaniel with the invitation to come and meet Jesus of Nazareth, the one Moses and the prophets spoke about. Nathaniel's response would have seemed a put off – can anything good come from there? Note Phillip's tactical response – "*come and see*." No long apologetic as to why Nathaniel should come, why his argument about Nazareth was flawed, irrelevant, etc. Logic, persuasion, reason were not going to convince Nathaniel. What he needed was an exposure to Jesus – the experience of just being in His presence. That would change his paradigm.

Over time, my sense is that this initial friend of the paralytic made use of that same "*come and see*" tactic when it came to inviting others to meet his new paralytic friend. He didn't lay a guilt trip on them. He didn't give them a lecture about why they needed to be more compassionate to people who were challenged with disabilities. He didn't advance a rationale as to why this paralytic was (refreshingly?) different. But he did have enough of a relationship with each one that they were at least willing to accept his invitation to "*come and see*." Then he practiced persistent patience as he waited for those "*come and see*" seeds to start to relationally sprout.

When changing deeply entrenched paradigms/biases/prejudices is the goal, words/exhortations/implores seldom get the job done (implications for evangelical teaching and preaching?) What people need is an immersion experience that totally contradicts their long-held and entrenched paradigms. That's what a "*come and see*" strategy effectively accomplishes (a great discipling strategy as well!). And once these "*come and see*" invitees actually spent time with this paralytic, they too became smitten and (over time) became his friends. All because one person invited them to "*come and see*." That's my intuitive sense.

## *p*onderings

≈ Have you entered the world of people with disabilities? If not, do you have concerns/fears/hesitations about doing that? Are you willing to take a risk to discover that your concerns may be unfounded?

≈ Do you have friendships with people with disabilities? If not, any reason why?

≈ If you spend time with people with disabilities, have you thought about inviting (hesitant) others to "*come and see*"?

≈ Have you discovered the paradox of engaging people with disabilities – you think you will be a blessing to them, but you actually discover the reverse, they bless you.

≈ What speaks to you in the chapter?



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Jesus' forgiving and healing of a paralytic most likely took place at Peter's mother-in-law's *insulae* (multi-room) house in Capernaum. The remains of a similar multi-room house (above) can be found in Corizin, two miles (as the crow flies) from Capernaum. This aerial view of the center of ancient Corizin provides us a great perspective for envisioning the structural layout of the kind of house where the paralytic was lowered through the roof into the presence of Jesus.

*t2w0*

## *When Ministry Plans Go Awry!*

*When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

– Luke 5:19

We just marveled that a paralytic in first century Judaism would have had even one friend, let alone four committed comrades. Now it's time for these friends to carry this paralytic to Jesus.

At PBT we focus on restoring the original context of a passage. This process expands our (often) narrow, one-dimensional, Western, urban way of viewing the text into a wide-angle, 3-D, Near Eastern village perspective. A contextual approach slows the "movie" down allowing us to ponder the narrative frame by frame. The more in-depth look reveals "*the rest of the story*," allowing us to put ourselves into the unfolding drama while getting closer to the intended transformation epicenter of the passage. That's our mission – to do that and to teach others to do it.

Jesus started his Galilean ministry by healing people and casting out demons. In the first-century Jewish worldview, this established Jesus as yet another in a long line of miracle-working Pharisee Rabbis called the *Hasidim* – the righteous ones. The *Hasidim* were well known for their prayer-warrior nature and for doing things for the benefit of the community. However, the news of another miracle-working Rabbi on the Galilean scene, as wonderful as that would be, was certainly not the same thing as THE Messiah. Such perception quickly changed when Jesus healed the leper (Luke 5:12-14).



The Rabbis of Jesus' day taught that the healing of a leper was as difficult as bringing someone back from the dead. If that happened, it would be understood as an extraordinary miracle from God and one of the sure signs that the Messianic Age had arrived. Being a *Hasidim* miracle-working Pharisaic Rabbi was one thing, but being THE Messiah who can heal lepers was something else entirely. I suspect that healing of the leper prompted one of the four to suggest – *Why don't we bring our paralytic friend to Yeshua?*

If these four friends were at all representative of the Body of Christ, the one who prompted this let's-bring-him-to-Jesus notion (the "*champion*" of the idea), encountered various degrees of resistance. Less than affirming initial responses from the other friends might have ranged from "*Are you sure you really want to do this?*" to "*Can't we just be content with the way things are?*," to an emphatic "*We can't do that!*" In an honor-and-shame based culture, there was considerable long-term reputational risk involved in being associated with such an effort.

This "*champion*" knew he couldn't pull off his idea alone. He needed the other three. Thus, he had no choice but to wait, and persist in repeatedly requesting their support. Therein (often) resides the real "work" of the Kingdom – seeking and gaining agreement (Matt.18:19) on what God wants to accomplish (and how). Eventually all four got on the same page, although I suspect with different degrees of enthusiasm and/or conviction.

When the paralytic learned of his friends' plan, I wonder how he might have responded. Did he laugh at the "outrageousness" of the idea, or shed tears as he realized how much (in this honor-and-shame culture) his friends were willing to risk to see him healed? Did he contemplate, even briefly, what his life might be like if he could actually walk? Did the possibility of physical restoration start to take root in his mind and emotions? And what did his parents think of this "outside the box" idea?

Having (finally) agreed on this mercy mission, these four friends needed a plan. They knew where *Yeshua* often stayed – Peter's mother-in-law's house – but they couldn't predict when this itinerant Rabbi would be "home." They also knew they would not

be the only ones looking for Jesus whenever He returned. By the very nature of their stretcher-carrying task, they knew they would never be in the vanguard to greet Him. Thus their plan required a fairly rapid response so as to be in the second wave.

One day they heard the buzz that *Yeshua* had returned to Capernaum. Like a volunteer fire department, they quickly formed up at the paralytic's home, grabbed the corners of his stretcher, and started their (1/8?) mile (speed?) walk to Peter's mother-in-law's house. As you might expect, the one who said this will never work was already lamenting their delayed start and slow pace. The other two wavered between being cautiously optimistic and borderline skeptical. As they got closer to their destination, their arms and legs felt heavier and heavier. This was more strenuous than they had anticipated.

When they arrived at the entrance to the courtyard of Jesus' Capernaum "home away from home," reality hit them – their approach was NOT going to work! The courtyard was already packed with people. And who do you think might have quickly reminded the others, "*I told you so!*" Now what to do?

## pPonderings

∞ Just because we feel led to go on the offensive for the Kingdom doesn't mean the resultant journey will be easy, linear or go (some-what) according to "plan." How many highly fruitful ministries had to first endure a lean, circuitous, "*dashed dream*" phase before the idea/dream/plan began to take root and bear fruit? That's why we need to hold our ministry plans loosely. When we formulate our Plan A, it's good to have our Plans B and C in the wings because our Plan C may well be God's Plan A!

≈ Have you ever thought about the paralytic as he went through this experience? Contextual restoration of the narrative helps us read between the lines, get inside the text, identify with, and then become those we meet in the passage. As a result, these (no name) people become more than a passing word or two on a page as we relate our human condition experiences with those we meet in the text. If you had been this paralytic, what would have been some of the thoughts and emotions that might have flooded your mind and soul as you overheard your four friends discussing/debating this plan to carry you to *Yeshua* for (possible?) healing?

≈ When it comes to new ministry ideas, do you tend to be one who instinctively resists? “Champions” can be easily misunderstood (and even resented) in the Body, especially if the status quo is being challenged. It can be particularly lonely being a champion of notions that confront long-entrenched paradigms; e.g.; missions, discipleship, Christian education. Would you consider affirming someone in your Fellowship this week that persevered in a new ministry/project/task when many/most others ignored, resisted, or were quietly unsupportive?

≈ What speaks to you in this Reflection?

≈ **Closing (Reassuring) Thought:** *In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.* Proverbs 16:9



Illustration by Tim Ladwig; copyright, © 1991 by Dr. James C. Martin

A rendering of a 1st-Century Galilean *insulae* (multi-room) house that helps us envision Jesus' encounter with this paralytic. The open courtyard, rooms along two of the compound's four walls, and an earthen roof are typical. The interior "living room" shown was not evident in the *insulae* house footprint from Corizin we observed last month. I also would have had Jesus standing in one of the open doorways of a side room allowing people in the courtyard and on the roof to hear Him. Make those adjustments in your imagination as we continue this Luke 5 encounter.



Photo copyright, © by Todd Bolen

This elevated view from the west of the remains of Capernaum helps us appreciate its strategic location on the Sea of Galilee (SOG). Note the highway in the background which rests upon the International Highway (IH) of Jesus' time - the major trade route connecting Damascus with Egypt. Perched astride the IH, Capernaum was the obvious port to receive commerce from 14 cities/towns around the SOG that wanted to interact with the IH. Everything about Capernaum is strategic and everything Jesus does has strategic implications, including the forgiving and healing of a paralytic in Capernaum at this particular phase of His ministry.

## Three

### *Faith, Discernment, God's Will and the Body*

*When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

– Luke 5:19

At PBT we focus on restoring the original context of a passage (and equipping God's Kingdom servants to do likewise). This more in-depth look reveals "*the rest of the story*." And that gets us closer to the epicenter of the intended, transformational power of the passage.

C.S. Lewis once observed: *Reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning.* When I heard that, I knew where Western Evangelicalism (WE) was out of balance; too focused on reason as the (sole) means to draw people to God's truth. Missing is the appropriate use of imagination to draw meaning from that truth. A wood-working analogy reinforces this idea – *imagination* is the stain rubbed over oak (*truth*) to better discern its grain (*meaning*). Revisit the parables of Jesus if you want to see creative imagination used in the Kingdom by the Master Story Teller to reveal God's Truth (He is also The Story!)

Previously, we contextually marveled how unusual that a paralytic in first century Judaism would have had one friend, let alone four committed comrades. We pondered the dynamics that might have been involved as these four friends decided to carry their paralytic friend to Jesus. Let's pick up the narrative in Luke 5:19, where

these four discover their plan to enter the courtyard of Peter's mother-in-law's house will not work. They found that 25X40 foot space to be already filled with (mostly) curiosity seekers, all intrigued with listening to this new Rabbi who speaks "*with an authority like no other.*" These spectators are more drawn by the novelty of the experience than to be personally changed. Ironic isn't it. People who really aren't interested in being healed can unknowingly create barriers, keeping others who want to be healed from getting to Jesus.

If this quartet of friends is at all typical of church life, different platitudes are suggested to resolve their collective "*now what?*" The friend who was skeptical about the whole idea from the beginning speaks first – *God has spoken with this crowd. Obviously, this was not meant to be.* Then he adds, *if we had just gotten a quicker start, it might have worked.* In response, a second offers another perspective: *When God closes a door, He often opens another (or in this case, provides a back stairs!).* With conflicting platitudes, how will they agree on "*now what?*"

In the 1980's, I led dozens of Spiritual Gifts (SG) workshops. From reviewing more than a thousand SG profiles of attendees, it seems that about 3% of believers have been blessed with the SG of faith (an extra measure of surety and conviction regarding what God wants to accomplish in a specific situation). Conversely, 97% of believers are not endowed with that gift. Similarly, 2-3% have the spiritual gift of discernment. I wonder if one of the four friends had more "faith" than the others; or was more discerning so that when he spoke, the other three listened (like those E.F. Hutton TV ads of several years ago – *when E.F. Hutton speaks, everybody listens!*)

One of the benefits of SG "theology" is that we learn the Body of Christ works best when we fully embrace the "*priesthood of all believers*" and willingly submit ourselves to the SG's of others. The opposite is equally true. Body life can be very frustrating, ineffective and discouraging when SG's are ignored (or minimized). There is a very practical reason why Paul exhorts the Corinthians, "*Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be ignorant*" (I Cor. 12:1, bold added). I chuckled the first time I heard,

*"The thing about ignorance is it picks up confidence as it goes along"*  
Ring any bells?

As these four friends pondered what to do next, I wonder if one of them happened to glance down at the paralytic and saw a desperate yearning-to-be-healed hope etched in his face? If so, that may have provided enough "faith" and "discernment" to determinedly say – brothers, we' are not giving up. What if we take the back stairs to the roof and see if we can lower him over the edge by nudging some of the people out of the way? From the text, the others obviously agreed it was worth a try.

What motivates these four to keep on keeping on? Shortly, Jesus is going to acknowledge their "faith" (verse 20). What is the basis of their faith? Would they be able to pass a test on the Nicene and/or Apostle's Creed? Do they have any sense of the totality of Jesus – the Cross, His shed blood? No. They are not even thinking about forgiveness for their paralytic friend. They just want him healed. The basis of their faith is that they are convinced that Jesus can (and will) make a difference in the paralysis of their friend. And that is going to be enough "faith" for Jesus; enough faith for their paralytic friend to be healed and forgiven (does that fit neatly into all our theologies?!).

I would suggest at this point in Luke's narrative there has been no thought given by these friends to damaging a portion of Peter's mother-in-law's roof to get their friend in front of Jesus. After we develop the context (next chapter) on how these first-century Galilean roofs were constructed, it will become clear that opening up a hole in it is a beyond-the-pale thought at this moment. So they picked up the stretcher, found the back stairs, and carried the paralytic up to the roof.

As they approached the top of the stairs, the one in the lead glanced across the roof and realized this too is **NOT** going to work. More people had gone to the roof to hear Jesus than they could make out from below. The roof crowd wasn't just one or two people deep, but layered six and eight deep. Creating enough space to get to the edge of the roof is not going to be feasible. **NOW** what to do?

## pPonderings

≈ How did you react to C.S. Lewis' quote regarding the need for *truth* and *imagination* to travel together like Siamese twins? What happens to a church when the appropriate role for imagination in teaching and preaching is minimized?

≈ Ever thought of Jesus as the consummate imaginative Story Teller?

≈ How do you go about making where-to-from-here decisions when there are barriers to realizing your (ministry) plans? Do you intentionally seek out the wisdom of those God has placed in the Body with the spiritual gifts of faith and discernment for your benefit?

≈ When it comes to living out "*the priesthood of ALL believers*," to what extent has your church/fellowship embraced it?

≈ Are you convinced that Jesus can make a difference (right now) in any and every aspect of your life? What might you have to do to get that conviction to travel 15 inches south from your head to your heart?

≈ How would you assess the degree to which spiritual gifts are in full flower in your church/fellowship; i.e., where everyone 1) knows their SG's, 2) is being mentored in his or her area(s) of giftedness, 3) is using his or her SG's regularly in ministry, and 4) where all the ministries of the church are aligned with SG's? As is readily apparent, ignorance has anemic consequences!

≈ Do you have any friends who have some aspect of their life (physical, emotional, relational) "paralyzed" right now; friends who need to be brought to Jesus? Do you have sufficient faith to persevere in bringing him or her to Jesus?

≈ What speaks to you in this Reflection?



Photo copyright, © by Doug Greenwold

This interior view of a fifth-century Galilean roof reconstruction in Katzrin (an open-air museum) in northern Israel gives us a "feel" for the kind of roof that is part of the context of Luke 5:19. Since this roof is not as robust as first-century roofs, envision a thicker roof with a second layer of branches on top of the branches you see. What should be immediately obvious is the need for a shovel and a saw to penetrate this roof, an opening that can only be made between the cross beams. This is a task that will take some time. And it's crucial you pick the right spot to start digging!

# four

## *A Faith that Wrecks a Roof!*

*When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

– Luke 5:19 NASB

A teaching colleague once observed: *The biblical writers assumed their readers lived when, where and how they did. They had no need to explain what everyone knew to be true. They just assumed you knew.* Two thousand years later much of what they assumed their readers would know is missing. That's what needs to be put back in place. At PBT we focus on restoring the original context of a passage (and equipping God's servants in the Kingdom to do the same). Doing so reveals "the rest of the story" and draws us closer to the intended transformational power of the passage.

Reading on in Luke 5:19, we realize with this foursome why their revised plan to go to the roof of Peter's mother-in-law's house was problematic. Too many late comers were already assembled near the edge of the roof to hear Jesus. To fully appreciate the enormity of what is about to happen – digging a large hole in this roof – we need to contextually reconstruct first-century Galilean roofs. This may not sound particularly exciting, but it is necessary in order to appreciate the risk these four friends were willing to take to accomplish their objective.

The roofs of these Galilean homes were flat to serve multiple social meeting purposes. Thus there were always outside stairs leading to the roof. Archaeological evidence suggests the sturdy

roofs were typically composed of firmly packed earth (clay and straw) and stone covered with some type of hard substance, e.g., brick or stone. This earthen roof was laid down over a robust wooden lattice comprised of tree branches, boughs and limbs which in turn rested on either basalt or wooden cross beams. The result was an 8 to 10-inch thick roof of hardened clay resting on layer(s) of wood. You can imagine what a time consuming effort it was to open up a hole large enough through which to drop a stretcher. Fortunately, Rabbis taught as long as people listened. And these friends definitely needed time to pull this off.

Note that the NASB translation calls the roof covering tiles. Contextually, there were no tiles used in Galilean roof construction. Remember, Luke is a Greek and he is writing to another Greek – Theophilus – who knows nothing about Galilean roofs, but does understand tile roofs in his Greek world. So Luke intentionally uses tiles to better communicate this encounter. Does that mean that the Bible contains error? Absolutely not! Luke intended to use the Greek word for tiles, and the Bible correctly (and inerrantly) captures that.

Why the distinction between tiles and a thick earthen roof? Because of the implications for what these four friends are about to do. Westerners read tiles and assume they can easily be removed in a non-destructive manner. The ensuing assumption is that it would be a straightforward task to replace the tiles after the miracle occurred. Not so. There is nothing easily repairable about a two-foot by five-foot hole in one of these roofs. They are not modular in design, but rather, one-piece seamless roofs. Thus, the opened section can't easily (and neatly) be replaced. These friends are about to create a "problem" hole that, while it can be temporarily covered when it rains, cannot be repaired (this may be the first sky light ever in a Galilean roof).

This roof context helps us understand some of the debate that must have been going on as this quartet ponders "now what" for the second time in 15 minutes. Whoever first suggested, "we need to open up a hole in the roof" would have immediately evoked reactions ranging from surprise to shock on the faces of the others.

"We can't do that" would have been a predictable response. Destroying a roof to bring an "outcast" to Jesus would never be well received, particularly in this honor-and-shame culture. The reputational consequences associated with destroying a roof are enormous and long-lasting.

While these four debated on the roof, it wouldn't surprise me if one of them blurted out a common ethical platitude, "the ends never justify the means." That may have prompted a calming, countervailing response from the "champion" of this whole idea, if we truly believe Jesus will heal our friend, we can also trust him to make our means acceptable to the community. Since Jesus stays at Peter's mother-in-law's house when he is in Capernaum; then maybe, they might have reasoned, He can find a way to affirm what they were about to do.

This context tells us how convinced (and accurately so) these four were of Jesus' willingness to heal their friend for them to consider this roof wrecking act. As they balanced their reputational risk versus the healing reward for their friend, they made a collective decision to bet their futures on Jesus. Now they needed shovels and a saw in order to start wrecking a portion of the roof to complete their hoped-for healing mission.

## *p*onderings

≈ How do you typically react to the "ends never justify the means" argument? Are there ever exceptions? What about smuggling Bibles into Eastern Europe (an "Illegal" activity) during the Cold War?

≈ When things really get tough and discouraging in your approach to ministry, how do you discern whether to “pack it in” or to press on with a new controversial “hole in the roof” approach?

≈ Have you “bet” everything on Jesus? Or is your faith a “Jesus + something” faith; e.g. Jesus + my 401K, Jesus + my abilities, Jesus + my family?

≈ There are times when we all need to be carried on the wings of the faith of others. That is part of what the Body of Christ is all about. Are you willing to let the Body carry you during those times and seasons of faint faith in your life?

≈ Surprised at how Galilean roof construction deepens our understanding of this passage? Agree or disagree: Context ALWAYS matters! What happens when we choose to defy or ignore this interpretive “Law of Gravity”? This interpretive reality is always at work whether we realize it or not, or like it or not. As we all know, defying gravity can get you hurt!

≈ What speaks to you in this Reflection?





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This encounter takes place in Peter's mother-in-law's house which is right in the center of Capernaum. That site (covered in the picture) is about 80 feet from the Synagogue and about 60 feet from the waterfront. What is unfolding in "downtown" Capernaum will be the talk of this town for decades.

At this point in the passage, the reputations of these four friends is hanging in the balance as they risk bringing this "outcast" to Jesus. Will they be honored or shamed for the rest of their days. We are shortly to find out!

# Five

## *Forgiven? We Didn't Come for That!*

*When they could not find a way in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof, removed some tiles, and let him down in the middle of everyone, right in front of Jesus. Impressed by their bold belief, he said, "Friend, I forgive your sins!"*

– Luke 5:19-20, *The Message*

Alistair Begg once observed that *those of us who know the Bible well can suffer from knowing the Bible well*. We can easily conclude that since we are "familiar" enough with a passage we can quickly skip over it to get to another. As a result, we get lazy and don't dig deeper.

I learned long ago that when you discover a rose bud in Scripture, pause and wait for it to open so its depth, beauty and fragrance can be appreciated. That's what we do (and demonstrate) at PBT – contextually allow Western (passage) rose buds to open up into fully developed Near Eastern roses. Doing so reveals "*the rest of the story*" and the intended transformational power of the passage. Hopefully we are demonstrating the value of watching a rose bud slowly open with the "digging deeper" development of this Lukan passage.

Creating an access hole near Jesus in the targeted side room where He was standing would have taken a considerable amount of time. All that digging and cutting had to have fostered a growing commotion around Jesus. Using some appropriate imagination, let's envision this scene. Slowly a hole began to appear in the roof,

expanding until it was large enough for a man on a stretcher to descend. All this time, clumps of dirt and stones were likely dropping down in back of Jesus as He stood in one of the doorways.

Was Simon Peter taking this scene in and wondering what in the world is going on! And was he second-guessing whether he should have increased his mother-in-law's homeowners insurance coverage for "Acts of God" now that Jesus is staying there (we need to smile from time to time!)

As this hole in the roof enlarged, more and more daylight penetrated behind Jesus into this dark room, providing what photographers call a back-lit scene. Obviously, Jesus carried on with His teaching as this intriguing hole in the roof grew, debris continued to fall, and more and more of heaven's light entered the dark room (world) behind Him, illuminating the unfolding scene for all to "see!" Many of the spectators in the courtyard and on the roof probably couldn't decide where to direct their attention. Should they focus on the words of Jesus as He taught in the doorway or to this never-saw-this-before roof-wrecking scene unfolding on the roof!

Finally the paralytic is lowered and lands next to Jesus to the shock and surprise of almost everyone except Jesus. The Scribes and Pharisees' surprise would have been laced with arrogant scorn. How dare people do such an audacious thing for so obvious a "sinner?" (Remember the disciples' reaction in John 9:2 when they saw a blind man: *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*)

As Jesus acknowledges this paralytic, the crowd must have wondered, "What will Jesus do about this brazen interruption?" Luke records that *seeing their faith, He said, "Friend, I forgive your sins."* The use of the word "*friend*" is particularly striking and should have immediately communicated to this foursome of friends – *so far so good!* Not only did Jesus not dismiss or chide them, He called their paralytic a "*friend*."

Don't miss the significance of this salutation – a greeting of good will. Jesus' first priority was to give this unnamed person a new identity. Heretofore, this paralyzed person was probably known around Capernaum as "*the cripple*" (permit me contemporary

jargon). Note that Jesus doesn't say, "*Cripple, I forgive your sins.*" From now on you this paralytic will be known as Jesus' *friend*. Wow!

We see this notion of "*friends*" at the "Last Supper," when Jesus says to His disciples, "*I no longer call you slaves, because the slave does not understand what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, because I have revealed to you everything I heard from my Father*" (John 15:15 NET). With this *master/slave/friend* language, Jesus is drawing upon an act known as *manumission* in the Greco-Roman world whereby the master officially sets his slave (*doulos*) free. As a freedman, the former slave/master relationship is changed to that of a patron and his client.

The technical word used for *client*, is a *friend* of the patron. In the Roman world, your patron is the only one who is for you. Everything else in Greco-Roman culture is stacked against you – including the gods. In this dynamic, every morning the patron's clients bring their petitions to him. While space does not permit a more robust development of the Roman context for patron/client-*friend*, by addressing this paralytic as *friend*, Jesus communicates a lot, quickly, and with just one word!

I wonder if the paralytic's four friends were stunned as they suddenly realized their plan (once more) wasn't going as they had hoped. Getting forgiveness for their friend wasn't why they came, not what they were expecting, and certainly not what they wanted. After all, they brought him to Jesus **to be healed**. Might they have silently reacted, "*Get real Jesus! We didn't come here for that! Be responsive to our friend's paralytic predicament. Be relevant to his obvious need. We didn't go through all this trouble to get him forgiven.*"

But from Jesus' perspective, He has the perfect holistic solution in view for this paralytic's predicament. We can only imagine what Jesus was thinking to Himself as others grappled with the unconditional "*forgiveness*" He had just declared. Furthermore, Jesus knew the paralytic's friends did not understand that if He healed the man physically, he would still be paralyzed (separated) in his spiritual relationship with the Father.

Jesus knew the paralytic most needed to be fully restored in his relationship with his Creator, not just physically healed. So with first things first in view, everything has to start with forgiveness. Their friend needed to be fully restored, not just rescued from his physical paralysis.

## pPonderings

≈ Has Jesus ever surprised you with how He answered some of your pressing prayers? That while you prayed for one thing, something else seemed to arrive on the scene that you didn't expect; but later looking through the rearview mirror it was exactly what you needed at that moment in time; you just didn't know or appreciate it?

≈ When was the last time you pondered that in Christ you are a (totally) forgiven person? Have you lost the joy and wonderment of being cleansed by Jesus? Might want to revisit Isaiah 1:18 and Psalm 103:12.

≈ If restoration starts with forgiveness, are you withholding forgiveness from anyone? If so, that's an issue you need to confront! You may be the roadblock to that person's path to restoration.

≈ As a believer, have you ever pondered what it means for Jesus to declare you as His *friend*?

≈ With Jesus, rescue is where it starts, but restoration is the objective. That insight can reshape the way we pray for those in need. Do we tend to pray prayers just for (immediate) rescue or prayers that also recognize the need for complete restoration?

≈ What speaks to you in this Reflection?



Stained glass window by Powells of Whitefriars of London; installed at Calvary Episcopal Church, Summit, New Jersey; used by permission of P. Neil Ralley of stainedglassphotography.com

## 6x

### *Forgiven? Jesus You Can't do That!*

*When they could not find a way in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof, removed some tiles, and let him down in the middle of everyone, right in front of Jesus. Impressed by their bold belief, he said, "Friend, I forgive your sins!" That set the religious scholars and Pharisees buzzing, "Who does he think he is? That's blasphemous talk! God and only God can forgive sins."*

– Luke 5:19-20 *The Message*

There is a difference between waterskiing across the surface of the Scriptures and scuba diving below the surface to discover "the rest of the story." Phillip Jenkins has observed that *reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.* That's what we do at PBT – equip the Kingdom to scuba dive below the surface of our western way of approaching the Scriptures to help people discover the original Near Eastern contextual depths of God's Word. This draws us to the epicenter of the transformational power always intended for that passage.

Verse 5:17 is important context for the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees that is about to unfold...*One day as he was teaching Pharisees and religious teachers were sitting around. They had come from every village in Galilee and Judea, even as far away as Jerusalem, to be there.* (The Message) The question needs to be asked, why is Jesus now on the radar screen of the Jewish Establishment?

The answer lies in the significance of what Jesus did in the prior encounter with a leper – He healed a man “covered” with leprosy. There were Rabbis who authoritatively taught that healing a man “covered” with leprosy was as hard as bringing someone back from the dead. It would only happen when Messiah came. And so when Jesus directed the cured leper to go straight to the Temple and present himself to the priests for inspection (5:14), this healed leper became Jesus’ calling card to the Jewish Establishment that the Messiah age had commenced. That’s why the Establishment is suddenly energized to “check him out.”

There is another piece of context that we need to put in place to add even more texture to Jesus’ encounter with this paralytic. However, to fully appreciate it, we need a 5,000 foot perspective where we will see how Luke has carefully constructed the chronology of these encounters. From this elevated view, Luke shows us that Jesus has been systematically establishing and expanding His authority – over transient disease (4:39), over nature (great catch of fish in 5:6), over chronic disease (the leper, 5:13) and now over sin.

This “sin” motif is first introduced in Luke 5:8 when Simon declares himself to be a sinful man. There is humanity’s problem – *sin*. So how bad is this *sin* problem? So bad we’re completely covered with it (just like the leper). If *sin* is the problem, and we’re terminally covered with it, then what is God’s remedy for *sin*? It’s forgiveness. Understanding these 5,000 feet umbrella themes that continue from passage to passage, encounter to encounter, helps us better understand what’s happening at ground level so we can keep the intent (and original meaning) of the present passage in clear focus.

From the perspective of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, they had an immediate “problem” with Jesus’ pronouncement of forgiveness to the paralytic, “Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sin, but God alone?” Well, they got that part right! No one can forgive sins but the Divine and that authority has not been delegated to men. These Pharisees’ consternation rises out of being prisoners of their “forgiveness” paradigm and unwillingness to view Jesus as God’s long-awaited Messiah.

To be “righteous” in first-century Judaism, it was necessary to  
 1) exercise scrupulous behavior – never do anything “wrong,”  
 2) go to the ritual purification baths when ceremonially unclean, and 3) participate in the required Temple offerings and sacrifices. Doing these three things made one “right with God” by definition. According to first century Judaism, “forgiveness” is imputed to a person by the religious “system.” Thus to the Pharisees, there could be no real “forgiveness” without the mandated Temple sacrifices and offerings. But Jesus had just declared this paralytic “*forgiven*,” even though there was no animal sacrifice rendered on his behalf and they were obviously not in the Temple!

Looking at this scene from Jesus’ perspective, He has the perfect holistic solution in view for this paralytic’s predicament. We can only imagine what Jesus was thinking as others grappled with the unconditional “forgiveness” He had just proclaimed: “*Yes, you Pharisees are right that forgiveness does require a sacrifice, and this is not the Temple. In just a little while, however, I will be standing before Pilate in another courtyard getting ready to make an incredible sacrifice that will change access to God’s forgiveness. You don’t know it yet, but I also have a new ‘Temple’ in view.*”

## Ponderings

≈ Have you ever thought about what’s taking place at 5,000 feet in the Gospel passages at the same time you’re immersing yourselves in the ground level contextual specifics of a passage? Having awareness of those elevated themes being intentionally developed overhead is a good way to increase the probability that we are “*rightly handling the word of truth*” at ground level. It’s a safety net keeping us from 1) missing the main point, 2) getting stuck in an interpretive *cul de sac*, or 3) gravitating toward a ditch on either side of the interpretive road.

≈ Are you seeing a confrontational Jesus at work in the passage when it comes to the Scribes and Pharisees? He is deliberately provoking them. When it comes to the religious establishment, no gentle Jesus, meek and mild here!

≈ Even though no one had yet realized it, Jesus had just rendered the Temple sacrificial system obsolete.

≈ To the extent that we take our forgiveness for granted, we dampen our joy/appreciation/thankfulness/gratitude for what Christ accomplished on the Cross. Have you been suppressing your joy and gratitude without even realizing it by taking your forgiveness for granted?

≈ Like the Pharisees, might we also be “prisoners of our paradigms?” Prisoners of the theological “system” we grew up in, was taught to us in seminary, have acquired from influential people in our lives? Even the best of theological systems is but a finite

attempt to systematically understand and characterize an infinite God. By definition, any such “system” is therefore incomplete. How can we break out of the paradigms that we unknowingly superimpose on a passage to force it to conform to our theological framework? Having shared contextual Reflections for some time, I am particularly aware (from feedback) that there are different interpretive theological “grids” that either restrict or sometimes change what is actually unfolding in the passage to try and force it into a predetermined outcome. Don't mean to get too technical, but those are some of the real issues we face in trying to *“accurately handle the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15). We have to be careful that we don't force the passage to conform to our theology, but rather let the original (integrated contextual) meaning of the passage form or reform our theology!

≈ What speaks to you in this Reflection?



Aerial photograph copyright, © by Dr. James C. Martin

Jesus has just healed the paralytic and proclaimed His Messiahship in “downtown” Capernaum. This ex-paralytic and his friends received much more than they ever hoped they could. That is often what happens when we come to Jesus. That double healing is the focus of this chapter.

# seven

## *Exceeding Expectations with Jesus!*

*Impressed by their bold belief, he said, “Friend, I forgive your sins.” That set the religious scholars and Pharisees buzzing. “Who does he think he is? That’s blasphemous talk! God and only God can forgive sins.” Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking and said, “Why all this gossiping whispering? Which is simple: to say ‘I forgive your sins’ or to say ‘Get up and start walking’? Well, just so it’s clear I’m the Son of Man and authorized to do either, or both...” He now spoke directly to the paraplegic, “Get up. Take your bedroll and go home.” Without a moment’s hesitation, he did it – got up, took his blanket, and left for home, giving glory to God all the way.*

– Luke 5:20-25 *The Message*

Gary Burge reminds us: *We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide.* Part of PBT’s mission is equipping people to get below the surface of our western way of approaching the Scriptures to discover the Near Eastern contextual depths of God’s Word. That historical, cultural, geographical and literary backdrop gets us closer to the original meaning, and therefore to the epicenter of the transformational power that the Holy Spirit always intended for a passage.

As this encounter builds to a climax, Jesus asserts his Messiahship in no uncertain terms by deliberately referring to

Himself as the *Son of Man*. This direct *remez* (intentional reference) back to Daniel 7 is Jesus' way of overtly saying that I am Messiah. You Pharisees are indeed correct to contend that only God can forgive sin; and I am His Divinely authorized representative. (A *remez* is a standard rabbinic teaching technique which uses a short phrase harkening back to a longer prior passage. For a more extensive development of this literary form "tool," refer to the "Introduction" of my book *The Rest of the Story*.)

This phrase *your sins are forgiven you* is in the perfect passive tense which means that God has already forgiven the paralytic his sin. Furthermore, Jesus is in essence saying, I have the authority to pronounce/declare that forgiven outcome to you. What is remarkable is that we are given no clues by Luke that the paralytic even wanted to be forgiven, nor did his friends seek that!

Putting an exclamation point behind His assertion that He has the authority to forgive others as God's Agent, Jesus says to the paralytic, *I say to you, get up, pick up your stretcher and go home*. As Luke records it, *immediately he got up before them, and picked up what he had been lying on, and went home glorifying God*. Why did Jesus direct the paralytic to pick up his stretcher and carry it home? Could it be that He wanted that stretcher to be a tangible memorial, a lasting memory, of what Jesus did for him? Likewise, a lasting memory for these friends, his family, clan and neighborhood? Do you have such stretcher-in-the-corner tangible remembrances for what God has done for you?

The Hebrew understanding of *glorifying* means to accurately reveal and portray God to others. This ex-paralytic went home accurately telling his story and in so doing correctly portrayed God (Jesus) to others. That's what "prisoners" who have been set free are expected to do – glorify God by accurately telling their story to whoever will listen, rightly/accurately depicting what God has done for them.

As the friends of this now ex-paralytic scramble back down the roof stairs and accompany him home, I wonder if it was sinking in that they had just received far more than their fondest and highest expectations. Their friend had just received a double healing – an outer healing to be sure, but an inner healing as well that came with hope for the future. That is often the way it is when you come to Jesus. In His loving response, you often get sooooo much more than you hoped or planned to receive. Remember...*God can do anything, you know, far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams* (Ephesians 3:19, *The Message*).

Returning to our initial thesis in the first Chapter that our view of God is the most important thing about us, what have we learned about God in this passage – who He is, how He does things and what He cares about? For starters, we can certainly observe that

- God can forgive the sin of a person that separates him or her from Him.
- He is sovereign in when and how He forgives.
- God is incredibly gracious and merciful – He will forgive a person who was not even expecting to be forgiven!
- He is unpredictably beneficent – come for one thing and get sooo much more! Come for an outer healing and receive an inner healing as well!
- He welcomes the unconventional approaches of those who are determined to encounter Him?
- Add your own observations...



## Ponderings

≈ If you had been one of these four friends, what thoughts and feelings might you be having as you leave this scene?

≈ How have you been “glorifying God” lately; reflecting in your words and deeds to a watching world who He is, what He cares about and how He does things? Do you see that as your Job One?

≈ Do you really believe that when it comes to your life, God can do “*far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in our wildest dreams?*” Are you willing to stake your life on that promise!

≈ What speaks to you in this Reflection? In the overall encounter?

# 8ight

## *Woe to You Capernaum!*

*He now spoke directly to the paralytic, "Get up. Take your bedroll and go home." Without a moment's hesitation, he did it – got up, took his blanket, and left for home, giving glory to God all the way. – Luke 5:24b-25 The Message*

*And you, Capernaum! Do you think you're about to be promoted to heaven? Think again. You're on a mud slide to hell. – Luke 10:13 The Message*

Kenneth Bailey forever changed what it meant to engage ("*rightly handle the word of truth*") the Gospels in their cultural and literary context. The first quote of Bailey's I ran across back in 1988 was "*Context rescues truth from the familiar*." It seems fitting to end these reflections with Bailey's quote because we think we know the "familiar" stories of the Bible after repetitively hearing them through the "echo chamber" of Western Evangelicalism. As a result, we quickly move on to another passage without pausing to dig deeper. Bailey broke through that traditional Western paradigm and showed us how much of the Near Eastern "rest of the story" we have yet to discover.

As this now ex-paralytic and his four friends leave the courtyard scene, they (and hundreds of others) had just witnessed an extraordinary encounter. In a matter of hours, everyone in Capernaum would know not just of the healing (extraordinary all by itself), but of *Yeshua's* Son-of-Man claim that He was the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah. Wouldn't you think that great rejoicing would be the order of the day?

The Capernaum Chronicle (bear with me on this one!) has just composed its through-the-roof headline: "*Outcast Cripple Healed by*

*Yeshua.* Illustrations of *Yeshua* and this now-upright ex-paralytic are planned as well as a schematic of the roof. The editorial staff is frantically searching for a before-picture of this unknown person who was the surprising recipient of Heaven's extravagant Mercy and Grace. There will be no mention in the article of the four friends who creatively persisted in getting their "outcast" friend in front of *Yeshua*. Then, as well as now, showing mercy and compassion, particularly to "outcasts," is not a pathway to notoriety!

Lest we miss the obvious, this newly-healed, now former paralytic is part of a family. That makes me wonder how his father and mother responded to this healing? Did they accompany his friends to Peter's mother-in-law's house to see what might happen, or did they stay home not wanting to be associated with these "friends' folly"? And how might they have reacted when their son came walking through the front door of their humble one-room home carrying his bedroll?

A similar family dynamic would have existed for these four friends. How fast did the word spread through their respective clans about their 'you-won't-believe-what-I've-just-experienced' story that they willingly shared with anyone who would listen? Did all this trigger a revival, a wholesale embracing of the notion that Messiah is truly here? Apparently not.

The healing of the paralytic was just the first of several memorable healings and encounters that everyone in Capernaum would have known about – the healing of the Royal Official's son and the Centurion's slave, the calling of (that despised port tax collector) Levi, the bringing back to life of Jairus' twelve year-old daughter, the rescue of the Gerasene demoniac. Add in Jesus' obvious reputation as one who spoke and taught with an authority like no other, and you should have incontrovertible evidence that *Yeshua* is Messiah. Or so you would think, which brings up the issue of paradigms – the way we think and the "boxes" outside of which we cannot think.

In this observant Jewish culture, a rabbinic paradigm evolved as to how to recognize Messiah. He will be a military ruler and political king reigning from his throne in the Temple bringing 1) peace, 2) prosperity and 3) social justice (overthrow Rome).

Parenthetically, there are contemporary rabbis today who still contend that Jesus could not have been God's Messiah because none of that happened. This is why becoming prisoners of our paradigms – the way we think and process - is such a significant issue. The people in Capernaum had Messiah in their midst, yet missed Him because He did not fit their preconceived notions of how He was supposed to look and act. Amazing isn't it!

Thus, as Jesus prepares to leave Capernaum and head toward Jerusalem, He looks back over His time there and condemns the lack of faith He found in Capernaum. The townspeople were more than willing to benefit from His miracles, but not willing to submit to His authoritative teaching. And while the people of Capernaum enjoyed the "show" as spectators, and appreciated the benefits and the buzz of Jesus residing in their town for two years, they were unwilling to submit to His Living Word and embrace His radical notion (paradigm) of what He called "*The Kingdom of God.*"

I would like to think there were a few exceptions to Jesus' verdict of "no faith" in Capernaum – those four friends. They were more than casual observers to Jesus' miracles. Each was directly involved in hands-on ministry (carrying the paralytic) – a proven way to witness (up close and personal) Jesus and the Kingdom of God at work.

As we leave this encounter, a significant hole in the roof of Peter's mother-in-law's house remains. And there is a good bit of debris still lying on the floor. Somebody needs to clean up after Jesus. And that brings to mind those Young Life Capernaum club meetings where kids with disabilities are brought to hear Jesus stories. Blessed are all those Capernaum "friends" who help clean up! They too serve the Kingdom.

As previously observed, the roof is not fixable. That hole is now a permanent part (and reminder) of what happened at this house. Makes me wonder if people came for months afterwards to see that hole in the roof? Did Peter's mother-in-law relegate Jesus to stay in this newly air-conditioned room that He was responsible for creating? Was Peter tempted to turn that room into a shrine and charge admission to see this person-sized hole? Just wanted to end this encounter with a smile on our faces!

## Ponderings

≈ Do you resonate with *“Context rescues truth from the familiar”*? What implications does that reality have for your Bible study and small group?

≈ Have you sometimes wondered, *“If only I could have been in Capernaum with Jesus to experience His miracles and teaching my faith would be so much more vibrant.”* Didn't seem to make much of a difference to the vast majority of town folk in Capernaum. What would have made you an exception?

≈ Seen any miracles in God's Kingdom lately? Best place to encounter them is wherever hands-on ministry is happening. What's your hands-on ministry involvement these days?

≈ Like the people in Capernaum with their flawed paradigm of Messiah, where might we be prisoners of our respective Western paradigms in our churches and ministries today? Prisoners of out-dated mission's paradigms? Of anemic notions of what constitutes effective Adult Christian Education? Hampered by a stunted understanding of what *“the priesthood of ALL believers”* was intended to be? Prisoners of our clerical paradigm of pulpit and pew? Hamstrung by our meager notions of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus as well as what it means to make disciples? If so, how can we break out of those inhibiting paradigms we (unknowingly) accept and even passionately defend?

≈ What speaks to you in this chapter? In the overall encounter?

# Appendix

## *The Case for Context*

*A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.* – unknown

### *A Diagnosis*

Words in Scripture have precise meanings – they always have and always will. Unfortunately, 2000 years of a Western worldview layered over with 300 years of modernity thinking, have taken a toll. This has caused us to increasingly become egocentric people who prefer analysis, categorization and “how to” answers when reading the biblical record. We have also been conditioned to prefer simplistic answers to deep questions. As a result,

- ≈ Spiritual narcissism is increasingly becoming the malignant condition of the church. This causes us to approach Scripture as if it’s all about me – my Jesus, my salvation, my gifts, my call, my ministry – rather than first and foremost about Him.
- ≈ We increasingly don’t know how to accurately read the Bible as it was meant to be read, let alone understand the original purpose and meaning of a passage.
- ≈ Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to be more focused on what we think (or guess) a passage might mean rather than dig deeper to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean.
- ≈ With our “microwave” orientation to life, we are all too often focused on trying to quickly discern the “principles” or application of a passage rather than its intended purpose (and meaning) as part of a greater whole.
- ≈ We have a distinct preference for quick, easy answers packaged in neat spoon-fed formulas accompanied by simple diagrams, e.g. three steps to humility, four steps to effective prayer, and five principles of righteousness.

≈ We much prefer dissection, analysis and quantification, yet the Bible is all about synthesis and integration. Thus, we can easily become so preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (verse) under the microscope, that we forget the leaf came from a tree (book), and the tree came from a forest (entire Bible).

≈ We take the theological facts we discover and put them into categorized cubbyholes. Then having put a label on them, we convince ourselves that we have now mastered these truths. However, being able to identify and list all the attributes of God does not necessarily mean we actually “know” God!

Far too often these westernized, modernistic tendencies are as true for the pulpit as they are for the pew. When taken together, they create an interpretation climate that is often alien to the world of the Bible! Because of this twenty-first century mindset conditioning, much of what the Gospel writers assumed their Middle Eastern readers would contextually know and understand about a passage is now missing from our comprehension. While we still have the words of the text, much of the assumed context of those words is gone. As a result, we often hear only part of the passage and therefore grasp only a part of its intended message.

It should be a “given” that if we are going to connect with the fuller meaning of a passage for today, we first have to know what those words meant to those we meet in the Bible. To do that, we have to adopt their mindset. As a result, understanding the cohesive context of a passage becomes essential for several reasons.

### *Words Have Meaning*

Words have very precise meanings in Scripture. That’s why the biblical writers deliberately chose their words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate an intentional message. For the Gospels, insights into these word meanings include the

≈ Historical context they were rooted in, including the intertestamental and Roman occupation periods, as well as Israel’s own extensive history.

≈ Geographical context of the sites mentioned including their physical characteristics as well as their respective topographical, geological and climatic features.

≈ Literary context of the words used including their literary form, idiomatic expressions, linguistic meaning and their use in rabbinic teaching pedagogy.

≈ Religious context they were drawn from including the nature of observant Judaism, the Temple, Sabbath worship, the Oral Tradition, Rabbinic interpretive wisdom, Messianic themes and prophecy, as well as ceremonial feasts and ritual purification.

≈ Village context issues including Jewish social customs of mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, as well as the agrarian nature of farming, shepherding, vineyard care and fishing life.

Such an integrated contextual approach allows us to get closer to what the biblical writers intended to communicate about whom God is and what God wants to reveal to us about Himself in His Word.

### *Context Enhances Connectedness*

One of the issues that every Bible teacher struggles with is how best to get the hearers of a lesson or sermon to connect with the text. As pertains to Jesus’ encounters with people, how to help the listeners relate to and identify with these lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes, real people with real issues, in a real culture that was hostile to them. An integrated context enhances our ability to help others connect with the text and meaningfully identify with those individuals whom Jesus encounters.

### *Context Sets Helpful Boundaries*

One of the problems with many Bible messages today, so often crafted without the inherent constraints and illumination of context, is that a passage can easily be taken into metaphorical realms the biblical writers never intended. It can also be treated in allegorical ways that may actually violate the intent of the text. Carried over into small group Bible studies, this can easily slide into group thinking where we collectively listen to everyone’s version of “What do you think it means?” and then vote on the best answer! That may be good representative democracy, but it hardly qualifies as a group that correctly handles the word of truth!

### *Context Allows Meaning to Emerge*

Reconstructing the cohesive context of a passage is like staining a fine piece of wood. That approach does not change or alter the nature of its truth (its inherent grain). Quite the contrary, it serves to draw out the inherent grain (of the passage) so that its meaning and purpose can be more readily seen and understood. In this way, the revealed truth can be first seen, then internalized, and then lived out in the reality of every day.

### *Context Gets to the Heart of the Matter*

When all the aspects of the Middle Eastern contextual setting of a passage get rewoven back together for our western mindsets, we see that some things have not changed in 2,000 years. People then and people now still struggle with the same relational issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection. They are the timeless realities of the human condition. Integrated context allows these human issues to be more clearly drawn out of the passage for all to see. In doing so, the compelling narratives of the Scripture touch our hearts and connect us with the reality of both the text and our own life experience. As a result, we fall in love with Jesus more deeply.

Watching Jesus rescue and restore people from these human realities back then is to understand His non-changing heart for us today as we still struggle with all those same abandonment, humiliation and rejection issues. Post-modern people are still people with these same relational issues. Contextually restoring the Gospel encounters reveals the timeless truths of Jesus to be relevant to all ages, all cultures and all worldviews.

### *Context Enhances the Contemplative Disciplines*

Several years ago I attended something called the Spiritual Formation Forum. The purpose of that conference was to encourage disciples of Jesus to devote more time and attention to the contemplative side of life. As I left that conference, it struck me that the contemplative needs to meet the contextualist. If the contemplative is going to meditate on the words of Jesus and His encounters with people, then it behooves us to meditate on as much of that encounter as we can – to see the whole scene in 3-D. Doing so gets

us closer to the intended meaning of the passage and therefore closer to the epicenter of its intended transformation.

The contextualist brings a wide-angle lens that can help the contemplative see not just the one-dimensional 21st century Western understanding of many passages, but also the fuller first-century Middle Eastern understanding of the text. The biblical contextualist always provides more for the contemplative to ponder.

### *Context Provides Boundaries for the Appropriate Use of Imagination*

Jesus used the technique of imaginative story telling not only to reveal more about His Father, but to teach His disciples how to live, think, feel and act in the Kingdom of God. His imaginative use of stories allowed His listeners to remember His message together with its purpose and meaning. He is both The Story as well as the Story Teller. His parables were consummate narratives, rich with imaginative treatments of everyday images, situations and occurrences. His use of people's imaginations not only allowed his listeners to connect with the story, but also allowed them to remember it word for word so they could accurately pass it along to others.

In today's environment, using any form of imagination in some Christian circles runs the risk of being misunderstood. Today that word can also suggest meanings of fantasy, unreal, and make believe. That was the antithesis of how Jesus used His imaginative stories to connect with His listeners' lives. He used imagination to bring out both the truth and the meaning of what He was communicating.

In opening up a passage, we need to restore the rightful use of appropriate imagination in bringing out the fuller meaning of God's truth in memorable and transforming ways for pulpit, pew and culture. C. S. Lewis said in one of his selected essays that "reason is the natural organ of truth; imagination is the organ of meaning." For too long, evangelicalism has emphasized reason as the pathway to truth without also using appropriate imagination to bring the passage's meaning into clearer focus.

Contextually reconstructing a passage not only suggests appropriately imaginative ways to allow the text to come alive for people today, but also paradoxically sets limits on where that imaginative treatment can go. With the integrated context of a passage in place, limits are then set on where interpolation (“connecting the dots”) of the text can be taken and where speculation beyond the context cannot.

### *Context Allows Us to See the Whole Picture*

All too often during our time spent in churches, we end up being given many theological, doctrinal and factual ornaments, but seldom are we shown the tree on which to hang them. It's as if we have been handed hundreds of pieces to a puzzle, but no one has ever showed us what the completed picture on the top of the puzzle box looks like. We have emphasized the dispensing of facts without providing appropriate frameworks within which people can organize and understand the facts they have been given. I am convinced that the more we can reset a passage back into its original context, the more we will see the complete picture on the top of the box.

### *Contextual Resources*

You can find our favorite Preserving Bible Times' (PBT) resources for studying the Bible in context on PBT's website [www.preservingbibletimes.org](http://www.preservingbibletimes.org). Go to the “FAQ” section (top left side) of the home page, open that section and click on the last question you see: “What Are Some Other Resources That I Can Use to Expand My Understanding of Biblical Context?” By clicking that link, you will find a helpful list of contextual resources for understanding the Bible in its context organized by area of interest. These are some of the resources you may want to explore with your new contextual pair of glasses.

## *p*onderings

≈ We know that context matters in everything we do and in everything we know. Yet somehow we seem to so easily forget that notion when we come to the Scriptures. Why is this? How did this come to be?

≈ In the Middle East, the community is always more important than the individual. In the Western world, it seems to be axiomatic that the individual is always more important than the community. Since the Bible was written with an assumed Middle Eastern context, what implications does even just this one presupposition have for Western worldview people encountering and interpreting the Word of God?

≈ Without knowing it, how many ways might we be filtering the message of the Bible through our Western worldview perspectives? And then further massaging it so that it fits neatly within our framework of modernity thinking? Is it any wonder that sometimes we just don't “hear” or “see” what the biblical writers meant to communicate to us?



### Notes and Sources

1 Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, 2003), pp. 106, 116, 120.

2 II Timothy 2:15

3 Dr. David Allen, Handout from the Eleuthera Institute, Arlington, VA. Dr. David Allen, a Christian psychotherapist and author of *In Search of the Heart* has developed what he calls the "Bermuda Triangle of the Soul." His clinical experience suggests that the three sides of his Bermuda Triangle – abandonment, rejection, and humiliation – speak to the human condition of every person. The only question is to what degree. Contained within that prison triangle are the issues of guilt and shame in what Dr. Allen calls "The Hurt Trail"

4 Spiritual Formation Forum Conference, May 18-20, 2006, Westin Hotel, Long Beach, California.

## About the Author

Doug Greenwold is a long-time teacher of the Scriptures. He received his BS and MS degrees, as well as a MBA degree from the University of Michigan, where he also played basketball. For thirty-two years, Doug worked in general management and executive positions in Information Systems, Healthcare Services, and Life Sciences. He retired from the corporate world in 1999 to work with teaching ministries.

In 1978 Doug discovered he was called to teach the Scriptures, his true vocation. An ordained Elder in three denominations, Doug has been teaching the Bible, writing and leading retreats, conferences, and workshops for churches and para-church ministries ever since. In 1988, he first visited Israel on a study tour and realized the importance of integrating the context of the land with the biblical texts. Since then he has been an avid student and teacher of the Bible in its contextual setting.

Presently Doug is the Senior Teaching Fellow at Preserving Bible Times, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and presenting biblical truth through contextual restoration of the biblical record. Prior to that, he was a Teaching Associate at the C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C. Doug was also a Teaching Director with Community Bible Study and a Christian educator in the Washington, D.C. area.

Doug's first book, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, is a contextual revisiting of Luke's first chapter. This innovative book opens up this couple's remarkable journey of faith by telling "the rest of their story." His second book, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* contextually examines the missing ingredients from "making disciples" in the First Century in our Western notions of "discipleship" today.

Doug's third book *The Rest of the Story* takes familiar Bible passages and contextually restores them so we can understand all the implications of the passage as if we were Middle Eastern villagers. His fourth book *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Those Stories*

examines Jesus' interactions with Simon Peter, the leper, the paralytic, the calling of Levi, the rescue of the demoniac, the woman with the issue of blood, and others in a way that restores the First Century contextual richness of these encounters. His fifth book *Becoming a Judean Shepherd* revisits the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm through the eyes of a 12-year old boy learning shepherding from his father in Judea in the First Century.

Doug is the creator of PBT's "Bible Alive" weekend seminar and "Bible Alive" week-long intensives for pastors and teachers. He also leads PBT's multimedia seminars and conferences on "*The Last Days of Jesus*," "*The Bible: It's Land and Culture*," and "*Making Disciples Jesus' Way*."

Doug also co-leads contextual immersion trips to Israel (*The Life and Land of Jesus*) and Italy (*Paul's Response to the Roman World*). He is a frequent interview guest on Christian radio and is the author of over 50 articles on aspects of biblical context.

Presently Doug and his wife Nancy live in Columbia, Maryland, in close proximity to their children and grandchildren.

## About Preserving Bible Times

Preserving Bible Times (PBT) is a faith-based ministry with a vision for preserving and presenting Biblical Truth and meaning through integrating the Biblical text with its visual, historical, geographical, literary and cultural context. PBT's strategy is to creatively assemble a "tool box" of Bible Times related images and contextual elements that will allow the Scriptures to increasingly come alive for 21<sup>st</sup> Century people as they did for 1<sup>st</sup> Century hearers. As part of its charter, PBT has assembled one of the finest archives of Bible Times related images in the world. This includes aerial footage that is without peer. These resources are shared in a variety of ways with God's Kingdom to encourage believers and further equip teachers and preachers in the Body of Christ.

As a non-profit, 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt corporation, Preserving Bible Times depends on the contributions of like-minded people, as well as revenues from its "Bible in Context" resources, seminars and conferences to 1) research and write on the cultural, literary, historical and geographical context of the Bible, and 2) share these contextual materials in a variety of ways, e.g., print, video, digital, trips to Israel and Italy, with followers of Jesus Christ everywhere.

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\* 5 ½ hours of teaching - usually Friday night & Saturday morning

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## What others are saying about Doug Greenwold's teaching.

*Rich. Thought-provoking. Sometimes startling. Always refreshing. Doug's insights continue to inspire and stimulate my own thinking and give me new ways of looking at Jesus in the Gospels. Read! Reflect! Contemplate! Your heart and mind will be enriched.*

D. Michael Crow, Ph.D., CRM Project Coordinator for "Jesus-in-Context"

*I always benefit from Doug Greenwold's teaching and writing. He brings fresh, previously ignored insight: but more importantly, Doug opens up the biblical world and thus the Scriptures take on greater meaning and power. With Doug as a guide, stories and insights from the Scriptures jump off the page. Prepare yourself for a series of aha! moments.*

Bill Hull, Teacher and Writer, Author, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*

*Read, chew, reread and rechew Doug Greenwold's teaching on making disciples. It will be a "life-changer." One caution, I do not recommend reading his material before you go to sleep. It is too stimulating and paradigm shattering to provide deep rest.*

Chuck Miller, Trainer in Discipling, Author, *Now That I'm A Christian*

*Doug's teaching is like someone pulling the curtain back so you can see the movie that's been playing for quite some time on the BIG screen. Doug "pulls back the curtain" to help us all uncover wisdom and insights that have been staring us in the face for centuries.*

Pat Goodman, Teaching Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Timonium, Maryland

*Through revealing context, Doug has done a wonderful job of drawing out profound understanding and applications from "familiar" passages.*

Daryl Nuss, Chief Ministries Officer, National Network of Youth Ministries

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