

## Paralysed

For twenty-seven years I lived what I regarded as a normal life. I lived life to the full. I was well off. And I was well off because I worked hard. I enjoyed the richest of food and drink. I did as I pleased and I went where I pleased—and woe betide anyone who got in my way! Mind you, people got to be so afraid of my rages, that I usually got my own way. Friends, family, my workmen—they all knew to keep out of my way when I was in that kind of mood. And I was in that kind of mood a lot of the time. You see, I liked to get things done. And I had no time for anyone who didn't think like that.

Twenty-seven years!

Then for one year I couldn't do a thing. I couldn't even lift the little finger of my right hand. I couldn't walk. I couldn't speak. I couldn't even feed myself. At first I couldn't even think straight. I was helpless—helpless like a baby.

How come? I was paralysed. It happened suddenly without warning. I had just bought a new tool—an expensive piece of equipment it was. One of my workmen was to use it. I had showed him how to use it and told him to be careful. But he wasn't exactly the

brightest, and within half an hour he'd broken it. I hit the roof. I wasn't exactly in the best mood that day. I'd had a heavy night the night before, and that morning my wife had got on my nerves. I let rip. But something was wrong. It was the look on my men's faces I will never forget. It wasn't the usual fear. It was incomprehension and utter astonishment. It seems my words started to get tangled up. I started speaking gobbledygook. One of my men has told me since that it would have been funny, if it hadn't been so terrifying.

In a minute I couldn't speak at all. My head was splitting. I couldn't understand what people were saying. Everything went dark. And my right side went completely numb. I tried to take a step and I felt myself falling. I thought at that moment I was about to die, and all I could think was, "I don't want to die. I'm not ready!" That was the last thing I remember until I woke up in my own bed. Seemingly my men had carried me gently home (I didn't find that out until later).

My first memory is of total disorientation. I didn't know where I was or who I was. Then gradually things started to come back to me—very slowly. I wasn't dead. But I was as good as dead. I couldn't understand. I couldn't speak. I couldn't walk. I couldn't *do* anything—nothing that was worth doing anyway.

I wished I *was* dead. This was worse than death. I couldn't tell people what to do. I couldn't show people the right way to do something. This was utter frustration. At first I raged incoherently. Then I wept in bitter frustration. I, who had done what I wanted to do, who had done things for others, now had to have everything done for me. I, who had told others what to do, now was being told what to do by others. "Cheer up! Be thankful you're still alive! Try using a crutch." I know now they were all well-meaning, but I couldn't stand it. I refused to do anything. What good was I as a helpless gibbering cripple? I wanted to die.

But I didn't die. I gradually began to understand what people were saying. And that was a torment at first. I couldn't communicate and so people thought I was deaf as well as dumb, but I wasn't. And so I heard things that people would never have dared to say to my face when I was well. Some of it kind: "He was too busy. He worked too hard. God is giving him rest now." Others had a different interpretation, like the priest: "It is a judgement. God has punished him for all his sins." He knew how to turn the knife in the wound all right! Inwardly I raged against him. Just wait till I get better, and then we'll see what he says. But I didn't get better. And I didn't die.

But was the priest right? I began to be tormented in mind. Through the little things I overheard, my sins began to rise up before me. All the ways in which I had mistreated those who loved me — my wife and children, my workmen. My selfishness. My arrogance. My rage. At first I refused to believe it was me they were talking about, but gradually I came to see the truth, and it was an awful truth. For I saw that I received nothing but kindness and respect from them, but I had responded in annoyance and sarcasm and rage. I began to believe the priest was right. God was punishing me. I became terrified. I was now afraid to die and to face my Maker.

What made things worse is that I knew that I could never now go up to the Temple in Jerusalem to have sacrifices of atonement made for my sins. Even if I could have made the journey, they would not let me in. No one crippled was allowed in. I was excluded.

I began to pray. I began to bargain with God. I said, "God, if you restore me, if you take away this paralysis and give me back my health and respect, I will be a better man. I will do good. I will give my money to help the poor. I will help people. I will go up to Jerusalem and make atonement."

Then I waited, fully expecting to be cured. Nothing happened! An hour went by. A day. A night. Another day. A week. A month. Why didn't God hear me?

Wasn't I good enough for him? Were my intentions not good enough? What did he want? I began to rage against God. And then that made me even more terrified. Was there nothing that could change this rage within me? I began to feel I wasn't only paralysed physically. I was paralysed in spirit. And I couldn't change myself. I was paralysed by sin.

The only bright spot in those days was my men. They kept my business going. They appointed one of themselves as foreman and they reported regularly to my wife. Strangely enough the business seemed to flourish under the new regime! And every day or two they would come to see me. At first it was a torture. After a few words they didn't know what to say. They would look at their big hands and shuffle their feet and look awkward. Their one saving grace was that they didn't stay long. And gradually I started looking forward to their visits. They would just talk among themselves, but kind of including me in it as well, about the day, the work, the people they saw. After a while they relaxed completely and they joked and laughed. And they could see from my lopsided grin that I could still sometimes see the funny side in spite of myself. But when they'd gone, I'd lapse back into the darkness.

Then one day—it was the first day of the week—they came in and they were tremendously excited. I

could sense it, although they were trying to act normal (I'd become much better at sensing such things). Eventually they came out with it. They'd been working down at the harbour where the fishing boats came in, and everyone was talking about what happened the previous day. It involved the mother-in-law of one of the fishermen (a man called Simon—I knew them vaguely). She had been seriously ill with a high fever. Her son-in-law brought home the preacher from church, and he just took her by the hand, helped her up and she was cured! And that wasn't all. Seemingly he'd created quite a commotion earlier, when some man who was off his head started shouting and creating a scene in church. This preacher cured him with a word! As a result of all this, news spread through the town like wildfire and that night crowds gathered at the door of the fisherman's house, bringing all sorts of sick people and the preacher had healed them all!

A wild hope rose in my heart. Perhaps this was the answer to my prayers. Could it really be true? Could this man really heal people? My men asked me if I would like them to speak to this man—Jesus, they called him—and ask him for help. I nodded as enthusiastically as my paralysis would allow.

After they left, my mind was in a turmoil. At first I could hardly contain my excitement, but gradually I

started to think things over. I hadn't basically changed. I was still prone to the same rages and bitterness. Perhaps this Jesus wouldn't think I was good enough. It was one thing healing his friend's mother-in-law (who by all accounts loved serving others); it was another thing entirely healing someone like me. And then there were the other doubts. It was one thing healing a fever, that could suddenly end naturally, or even a mad person, who sometimes could suddenly seem quite sane for a time. It was a different thing altogether to cure immediately someone who had been paralysed for a year! That night I hardly slept with all these thoughts buzzing about in my head.

The next day was an agony of waiting — waiting for my men to come — waiting to hear the answer. How my emotions seesawed that day! When they came it was an anticlimax. They hadn't been able to find Jesus, because he had left to preach in other places, and nobody seemed to know when he would be back. I was gutted. I raged against it. After all I had been through! And now this! My hopes raised and now dashed cruelly. Bitter tears of frustration and disappointment soon followed. The men didn't stay long that night.

But a few days later they returned in high excitement. "He's back!" they said, "He's at Simon's house. Come on, we'll carry you." And they did. Even

if I hadn't wanted to go, I think they would still have taken me. They just picked me up on the mat I was lying on and carried me out—just as I was. But I did want to go. It was now or never.

That was some journey! I had hardly been outside the door for a year, and here we were hurrying along the streets—me bumping along almost enveloped in my mat, with my men taking it in turns, four at a time to carry me. As we approached the house, we could see people streaming towards it and, when we got near it, the street outside was jam-packed with people. People said Jesus was preaching, but we were so far away we couldn't hear.

My heart sank. We would never get through that crowd. We would just have to turn and head for home. But I reckoned without the ingenuity of my men. I was really proud of them that day. That was afterwards. At the time I thought they'd taken leave of their senses! One of them knew Simon's house and he led us round the side into an alleyway and up steps on to the roof. I couldn't see what help that was. Anyway, they laid me down on the flat roof and then started making a hole! What a mess! Dried clay and pieces of wood flying everywhere! It's just as well my men knew what they were doing or we might all have landed on the people below in the house! I now realised what they were up

to and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry! They grabbed pieces of fishing rope that had been drying on the roof and tied them to the corners of my mat, and without more ado lowered me slowly and gently through the hole in the roof!

I couldn't see a thing as I went down except the broken roof, and I remember wondering who's going to pay for that, and thinking how angry I would have been if someone had made that hole in my roof! By now Jesus had stopped preaching and there was a cacophony of noise. Some were cursing because they were covered in dust and debris. Seemingly there were some religious VIPs there that day, even some from Jerusalem. Some were saying, "This is outrageous!" Others were shouting, "What's going on?" One of my men shouted down that they'd brought me to Jesus because I was paralysed. I was on the floor by now and others could see me and I could hear people saying things like: "Yes, I know him. It's true. He's been like that for over a year now. Can't move, can't talk, can't do a thing. What a change!"

Then Jesus stood over me. He had been looking up at my men and the hole in the roof and smiling. He'd said, "It's just as well I'm here. Simon's a fisherman, not a joiner!" Then he looked down at me, and his eyes looked directly into mine. It must have been only a

moment, but it seemed as if the world stood still. Perhaps everyone did fall silent, but it seemed there was no one there but him and me. They say that the eyes are the windows of the soul, but I certainly felt that he was looking right into my soul, and I felt that even if I could have spoken, there was no need. He knew it all. The rage, the tears, the guilt ... the despair.

I don't know what I expected him to say. I don't know what other people expected him to say. But what he said was the last thing anyone expected him to say. He said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." He just said it, matter of fact like. I realised later the impact of those words on those present particularly the religious experts. It was as if he had picked up a knife and stabbed someone, or committed some other unpardonable sin. But I didn't notice any of that at the time.

There were two things that struck me. The first was the smallest, perhaps what others would think the most insignificant thing, but I wouldn't call it insignificant. Perhaps because it was the first word I heard him speak. He called me "son". Now, he looked only a few years older than me. But it was as if he was speaking to a younger brother. It was a word of full acceptance.

The second thing that struck me was of course the thing that struck everyone else, but it struck me in a

very different way. He said that my sins were forgiven! For some present that was a cause of religious controversy. For me it was life! For a moment I forgot my paralysis. This was the thing that had tormented me for a year, and now in a moment Jesus, calmly, authoritatively, declared that my sins, all my sins, were forgiven. My heart leapt within me and, if I could have, I'd have leapt off my mat!

But I didn't have time to take it all in. Jesus was speaking again, and it was in a different tone of voice. He was looking round at the religious leaders. He said, "I know what you are thinking. You're saying, 'This fellow is guilty of blasphemy. Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" From the nodding of heads, he had indeed read their thoughts. Suddenly my new-found peace and hope began to crumble. Of course only God could forgive all my sins. Only he has that authority. My wife or my daughter or my men could forgive sins I'd committed against them, but none of them, not even all of them put together, could authoritatively declare that all my sins were forgiven. And yet I felt they were forgiven.

Jesus pointed to me. "Which is easier: to say to this man, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say, 'Get up, take you mat and walk?'" He paused, and in that silence we

were all thinking, “It’s just as easy to *say* one as the other!”

But Jesus wasn’t finished, not by a long way. “This is so that you’ll know,” he said, “that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” He turned to me and addressed me directly, “That’s exactly what I am saying to you. Get up, pick up your mat and go home!”

Many have asked me to describe what happened next, but I can never really find the words to do justice to it. All I know is that for the blink of an eye, time stood still. And in that extended moment I knew many things. I knew I was standing on my feet. I knew my sins were forgiven. And I knew the One on whose authority both had been done. No one can remove paralysis in a moment but God—not the paralysis of body, nor the paralysis of sin. I walked out of there a new man.

There’s just one more thing I want to say. There was something that bothered me for some time. It was this. My sins were forgiven. I knew that. But what about atonement? My guilt was removed, but how? No sacrifices were made. I hadn’t needed to go up to Jerusalem to the Temple for my sins to be forgiven.

It was two and a half years later before I understood. I was up in Jerusalem, but not at the

Temple, and I saw a sight I will never forget. For I saw there another paralysed man. It was Jesus, the man who had set me free. He was nailed to a cross. He was weak. He was helpless. He was dying in darkness. And I remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah, "With his wounds we are healed."

Sometimes when people have heard my story, they say, "Isn't that marvellous? I wish I had had that experience. Then I would know!" Perhaps that's what you're thinking now.

My friend, I wouldn't wish my experience on my worst enemy. But I will say this. You may not be paralysed in body, but I have come to see that we are all paralysed by sin. The same one who cured me, can cure you.

Mark 2:1-12