

ENCOUNTERS

WITH

JESUS

Number Three:

THROUGH THE ROOF

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Jesus has moved to Capernaum and is using it as his base. Crowds come from far and wide to hear him speak and to be healed by him.

THROUGH THE ROOF

It wasn't my fault: it was Reuben's fault. He was the one who insisted on piling the logs so high. We all said it was dangerous but, no, Reuben said it was fine and what Reuben says, goes.

The real question is why it was me who was walking past just as the pile collapsed. Why just then? Why not one minute earlier or one minute later? Just one of those things, people say. Just bad luck. But I think a lot of them reckon that I deserved it—wouldn't have happened otherwise. Ben says that some people are saying it happened because Ruth and I had... you know. But we didn't—and now we never will. Her father has broken off the engagement and I didn't hear her complaining too much either. O Ruth, you're not as faithful as your namesake, are you? I now know why Naomi called herself 'Mara'; for I am bitter, my future is bitter, my hope is bitter.

In fact I think my situation is worse than hers, worse even than Job's. He had experienced wealth and prosperity before losing everything. At least he'd been with a woman; I never will. Even if a woman was stupid enough to take pity on me, I'd still not be able to do it—no sense, no feeling.

Job had sons and daughters to look after him in his old age and to remember his name when he'd gone. I have no-one, will never have anyone. I am completely and utterly alone. At least Job could still walk...

I don't remember much about what happened. Just the rumble and roar of rolling, a flash of light and incredible pain; then darkness. I woke to the most dreadful agony in my chest, worse than anything I'd ever known, worse than anything I could ever imagine—until then anyway.

As the days wore on and the pain subsided, I realised that there was something worse than pain: absence of pain. No pain, no feeling of any kind in my feet, my legs, my groin—nothing from the waist down. Above the waist I've been healed. I can talk, eat, move my arms, write, smile (though why I should want to, I don't know).

But so many ordinary things are lost to me. I have no control of some parts of my body. I go whenever and wherever my body decides. It's disgusting and I have to clear up my own mess as best I can.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THROUGH THE ROOF

Sometimes my mother has to do it for me—humiliating for both of us. Sometimes James and Ben do it; and that's better actually because they just make a crude joke of the whole thing. They're amazing. I think I'd go mad or even try to top myself if it wasn't for them. They, at least, have proven to be true and faithful friends. But I hate it that we're no longer three equals; that I am 'the crippled one'.

Now they've come to me again with yet another hare-brained scheme. I wish they wouldn't. In the last year they've brought doctors and healers to prod and to pray over me; they've taken me to holy men who've pronounced miraculous cures; and they've taken me to mystical pools whose waters are bound to heal—but nothing ever changes. Nevertheless, each time I can't help but hope and then the disappointment is even worse.

This time they want to take me to some new chap, a miracle worker called Jesus who lives in Capernaum, which is miles away. I say, "No! I don't want to go. It's too far and there's no point and I'm staying right here." But they just laugh and pick me up, put me on the stretcher and set off. "Tough luck mate. You're coming with us." And off we go.

Five miles is a long way to carry a dead weight (well, what else would you call me?) and though Ben and James are strong boys it takes us nearly three hours. They try to keep our spirits up but in the end the heat, the flies, and the continual jostling have got us all down. I may not be able to feel my legs but I can certainly feel my neck and back!

Eventually we get to Capernaum. It's quite a big place but fortunately everyone appears to have heard of this Jesus. "I'm pretty sure he's at home today," says a man we stop in the street. "Oh yes, he definitely is," says his wife. "My friend Miriam is going there today to see if he can help her conceive." "I could probably do that!" says the husband, laughing and winking at us—only to stop abruptly when he sees the look on his wife's face.

We ask directions. Fortunately, it isn't far and we're soon there. But we might as well not have bothered. The place is heaving, with people queuing up at the doorway, swarming around the house like flies around a corpse but with far less sense of order than even a swarm of flies could achieve.

Ben and Jim are nonplussed for a moment. "I told you we shouldn't have come," I can't help saying. The disappointment tastes like bitter

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THROUGH THE ROOF

herbs in my mouth. All this way, and for what? A buzzing squalling, meddlesome mess of raggedy people and no-hopers, just like me. What a waste of time!

But the boys—you can call them stubborn or stupid, but I call them heroic—won't give up. They look at each other, look up at the house, and nod. Suddenly we're off again, over to the wall of the house and up the outside stairs. I'm clinging wildly onto the stretcher and yelling, "What are you doing, you daft buggers? Put me down at once!" And they do; on the flat part of the roof itself. Before I can get my breath back they start taking off the turf from the roof and stacking the squares carefully on the edge. "Stop!" I say, "This is madness!" Do they take any notice? No, they just laugh at me and carry on.

I see what they're going to do now and I'm terrified. They're going to lower me down into the house. They're crazy! What if I fall? I could break my back again. Don't they care about me? And then the hole is big enough and they're taking out a couple of laths and they're ready to lower me down. Taking off their belts they tie the rope to the handles of the stretcher and manoeuvre me to the edge of the hole. "Please don't do this," I beg, but it makes no difference. I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe it but it *is* happening—I am gently swaying and descending! I offer a pointless prayer to the God who never listens and close my eyes and tense my muscles, waiting for the inevitable pain.

Instead, there's a gentle bump and I'm on the ground. I open my eyes and see a man; he must be Jesus. He looks at me, then up at the open sky where his roof used to be, back down at me again and then up again to where Ben and Jim are looking down—and he laughs! A big hearty, juicy laugh. I'd be furious if it were my house but he just rejoices!

Then he stops and looks down again at me. He drops to his haunches and he touches my arm. And the house, which had been full of chatter and noise, becomes absolutely still. He keeps looking at me, looking in a way I've never known before. Looking as if he's the first person who has ever really looked at me and I find myself submerged in that gaze, drowning in that look. I am swept along in a tidal current of caring and I am washed out.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THROUGH THE ROOF

Finally, he speaks: "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." Immediately I'm aware of two sets of things going on: there's a gasp and a hissing and a murmuring in the room, and also there's all sorts of gasping and hissing and murmuring going on inside me.

I don't know what I'd been expecting—the usual platitudes and mumbo jumbo, I guess—but I'd never expected anything like that! My first thought was, 'What the hell? Who gives you the right to say something like that to me? Who do you think you are?'

Then I become aware that the same sort of thing is going on in the room as well. I notice fringes and tassels and realise that the Pharisees are here. 'O great! Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse!'

But now a funny thing happens. I can still hear them prattling on about law and God and all that stuff but I seem to sink deep inside myself, with his words leading me down and down. My sins? What sins? Oh yes, all the blaming; all the self-pity; all the anger at Reuben; at Ruth; at God... yes, all that and so much more. I have been swimming in dark muddy water and now I see that I've been drowning inside ever since the accident—well, before then actually, but the accident had made it so much worse.

As I let his words enter my very soul, the water seems to clear and light begins to penetrate. The more I let it, the more it does. For the first time since I don't know when, I feel free. Free and light—so light that, never mind walking, I feel like I could float! I realise that this Jesus has done what no-one else could: he has healed me; and I want to shout a great Hallelujah!

But I keep it to myself, though it must surely have shown on my face, because the argument in the room is getting ever more heated. The religious men are standing up and pointing at him and shouting at him and jeering at him and he just stands there and takes it all. Suddenly he raised his arms and they all fell silent. "Alright, then," he says, "just so that you know that I have the authority to forgive sins, I say to this man, get up, take your stretcher and walk home."

"That's me!" I think, and before I can even say to myself, 'No way!' I am standing, actually standing up and the people in the room are cheering and applauding. I can feel my feet and my legs and they ache so badly but never has pain felt so good! And finally I do open my mouth and my Hallelujah is the loudest sound in that noisy room...

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THROUGH THE ROOF

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Since then, since that double healing, things have not always been easy. I still find it hard sometimes to forgive Reuben and Ruth (they're married now, did I mention that?) and I can still get bitter about the time I 'lost'. But underneath it all I now know that God is good and that he really cares for us! And Rachel, the baker's daughter, has been exchanging glances with me recently so things really are looking up. Life is pretty good—thanks be to God.

I do have one regret though: I never did get to thank that Jesus. I hope he knows just how much he means to me...

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS: THROUGH THE ROOF

NOTES

These events are recounted by Matthew (9:2-8), Mark (2:1-12) and Luke (5:17-26). I have followed Mark's account most closely, though I have added some details in the back story. Mark tells us that there were four men carrying the stretcher. While this is more likely to have been what actually happened, I have reduced their number to two in order to make the narrative more manageable.

The narrator refers to a 'Ruth'. Her story is told in the Book of Ruth in the Bible. Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, has lost her husband and her two sons. She calls herself, 'Mara', the Hebrew word for bitterness. (Ruth1:20).

Job, whose story is told in the Book of Job, is a prosperous man who suffers many calamities in his life before his fortunes are restored.

This healing is one of many occasions on which Jesus clashed with the religious leaders. By saying to the man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven," Jesus is taking on something that only God could do. No wonder that the religious leaders were scandalised. But Jesus goes further. This is no misunderstanding, he says, I do have the power to forgive sins—and to prove it I will heal this man.

'Halleluiah' is a Hebrew word, meaning 'praise God'.