Lifting the Roof

Isaiah 43:8-13

Mark 2:1-13

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, Your word is living and active and sharper than any two edged sword and we pray, that it may create life in us, that it may sustain and strengthen our spiritual life, as well as being active in cutting away sin from our lives and bringing light and truth into the darker recesses of our lives, and Father, we acknowledge that those darker recesses are there, but will you work in us by Your word and spirit to remove them progressively on the ground and the basis of what the Lord Jesus has done. We pray this in His name, AMEN.

Covenant people of God, one of the striking things about the gospel according to Mark is its brevity. The gospel of Matthew- 28 chapters. The gospel of Luke – 24 chapters. The gospel according to John – 21 chapters; and Mark – only 16 chapters. It is even more remarkable when you consider what John says towards the end of his gospel account in John 21:25 – where he said if everything that Jesus said and did was written down in books – there wouldn’t be enough books in all the world to contain those things. Which means, that Mark, in what he is putting down here, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, is very, very selective indeed. That also means that each new chapter of Mark’s gospel – each new event that he describes, each new miracle that he reports – that there is likely to be a new, specific reason for mentioning that thing in every chapter. Mark has a very tight agenda that he is working to.

Each new section, advancing the account, adding new information, new ideas, new themes, rather than simply multiplying examples of the same theme. The book is too short to have many examples of the same thing. And it is therefore important, especially in Mark’s gospel, to ask why any passage is there. Why the Holy Spirit has put that passage there, in any part of the Bible. But with Mark, it is especially important to ask what is new in each new account. And here in this particular section in dealing with the healing of the paralytic who was lowered through the roof, we can find two new things by which information Mark is advancing the account of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the gospel of God, the gospel of the kingdom.

One of those new issues is the issue of forgiveness. The forgiveness of sins. We have had mention of the gospel before. We have had exorcisms and healings mentioned, but now this new element in this chapter is bringing in the forgiveness of sins. And the other new thing that is mentioned here is the hostility of the scribes.

We look at those new elements under three headings

1. What Jesus did

2. What Jesus claimed; and

3. How the people responded

We note that the first thing that Jesus did was not a healing. The first thing that Jesus did as mentioned in this text is preaching or teaching. He was speaking the word to them – verse 2. Speaking to that huge crowd that had gathered around the place where Jesus was staying. Some people think He had His own house, or rented a house, or perhaps He was staying in Peter’s house – no one is really sure – but wherever it was – it is referred to as His place where He was staying, and the crowd when they found out about that, gathered as they did around that house.

Remember, from what we saw before in chapter 1:38, that preaching to these crowds, teaching these crowds, teaching the gospel of the kingdom, this was the main purpose of the Lord Jesus Christ. So we find at the end of this text in verse 13 what’s the Lord Jesus doing? He’s back preaching and teaching again on the shores of Lake Galilee. All the people were coming to Him and He was teaching them. That teaching of the Lord Jesus, the gospel that He taught included the call to repent and believe. Because the kingdom was at hand – the king had come and now the call went out even more urgently than ever before ‘the king is here so now if you haven’t done it already you better repent and believe in Him.’

And because that was the gist of His preaching, the gospel of the kingdom, and because preaching and teaching was the main thing that He did, already that introduced, at least by implication, the issue of forgiveness. Because the Lord Jesus was calling on people to repent, so then the question comes to the mind of the people ‘if we repent, is God going to accept that?’ ‘Is God going to forgive us?’

And so this was really an essential topic for the Lord Jesus to deal with because he was calling for repentance. In a way then, the subject of forgiveness is not completely new, it is at least implied already, but what is new here is the connection that is introduced between faith, forgiveness and healing. And that is something that unfolds in this chapter.

The occasion for it is an overcrowded house, where the paralytic and his friends are unable to get in through the door. Even the doorway is too crowded so they go up on top of the roof – no doubt a flat roof as houses had at that time, and they dug a hole in the top of the roof. One of the gospel accounts suggest they pried up some tiles, and then dug underneath it, and got a hole big enough to lower their friend through on his pallet. And what is especially significant here is the reaction of the Lord Jesus. You imagine if I was in the middle of preaching a sermon and suddenly a little trickle of plaster dust came down from the roof and we all looked up and the hole started to get a little bigger, and suddenly there is a guy lowered down on a bed by ropes with some other men standing up the top. I am not quite sure how I would respond to that, or how anyone else today would respond, what might you expect the Lord Jesus to say ‘what’s going on here, what are you guys up to?’ or perhaps ‘obviously you want a healing, bring the guy here, lower him down, I’ll do that’, but instead you get these remarkable, and unexpected words, ‘son, your sins are forgiven you’. Completely unexpected in circumstances like that. And then follows the healing. And it is a dramatic healing as healings go – they are all dramatic but this one is even more so than some – because when this man is healed by the Lord Jesus, we don’t see a man who suddenly drags himself to his feet, shaking and tottering as he begins to find his strength, and then takes a few halting steps like a toddler learning to walk, we find a man who is told, OK get up on your feet, pick up your bed and you carry the bed, and you carry it home by yourself. And that is exactly what happens.

Well, the crowd had already seen dramatic healings from the Lord Jesus. They had seen exorcisms. An exorcism even in the synagogue of all places. So they had seen healings and they had seen exorcisms and in one sense this was not anything new as far as that was concerned – it was another dramatic healing, but what is new here is the combination of that healing with these words – ‘your sins are forgiven’ bringing the two things together. That’s the real eye-opener here.

The connection between forgiveness and healing is this – man’s sin and rebellion which began with Adam and Eve has brought a curse on this world which explains all of the misery that we see around us – every bit of grief, every bit of pain, death, sickness, all of that comes from that event. That misery was something that evoked compassion on the part of the Lord Jesus as we found in Chapter 1:41. Now we don’t know if the paralytic was guilty of some particular sin for which he was being punished, that can happen at times, temporal judgements. Or is it the case simply because of the general sinful nature of mankind that has brought all these things into the world – and this man suffered because of the sin of man in general, rather than for some specific thing that he did – we don’t know the answer to that question, but there is certainly that connection between sin and misery. And so to undo the problem of misery, to undo the problem of sickness and pain and death and grief and such things, the Lord Jesus needed to deal with the root cause as well.

He needed to deal with the problem of sin which underlies the misery of this world. He is not like one of those doctors, not heard of so much these days, but I guess in the 70’s it used to be a saying that the medical profession would sometimes solve your problem by saying – go home, take two disprin and call me in the morning – that became a bit of a standing joke for cavalier way of the medical profession sometimes dealing with people’s complaints. But the Lord Jesus certainly doesn’t take that kind of approach. He doesn’t just deal with symptoms. He doesn’t just deal with effects. He goes to the root cause which is the problem of man’s sin. And that problem needs forgiveness to be dealt with, and in a way that is more important even with than dealing with the misery, which is the effect, the consequence of that underlying problem.

Jesus’ healings, therefore, all demonstrate that He came, that His kingdom was coming, in order to heal the whole man, body and soul, but most of all, healing the soul, bringing forgiveness of sins so that eventually there would also follow, sooner or later, the healing of the body as well. The removal of the consequences. Perhaps there are times when some of you wish that you could experience these kinds of healings – especially at times if you are very sick, or you have some sickness that won’t go away and perhaps you read these accounts in the gospels and you think ‘wouldn’t it be so good if I could have been there at that time and my friends could have brought me to the Lord Jesus and He could have reached out His hand and touched me or simply spoken the words and I would be healed’. And perhaps in some way at times we long that we could be in that situation. But the fact is, in a way we are in that situation. We are in that situation if we know the Lord Jesus Christ and our sins are forgiven. He’s already spoken those words to us, ‘son, daughter, your sins are forgiven’ – and because of that the rest will follow in His time, sooner or later the physical healing, the body to follow the soul, that will follow.

The other thing we see Jesus doing here is reading peoples’ hearts and minds. He sees that inward, that internal, faith of the paralytic and his friends which was evidenced in their determination to get through the rooftop. Sometimes the Lord healed people who had no faith. For example, demoniacs – people possessed by demons. They didn’t have faith before the Lord Jesus cast out the demons. Or how about dead people like Lazarus – they didn’t have faith (well Lazarus might have), but people healed didn’t necessarily have faith at the time when they were healed. But the Lord Jesus just spoke the words and they were healed. But more often than not, the Lord Jesus refused to heal people with no faith. And He made that refusal not because He could not heal those with faith, we ought not to have this view which some have that the free will of man is supposed to be so important that God can’t really do much, or doesn’t want to do anything to get in the way of free will, so He has to wait for people to ask Him. He has to wait for people to want Him to save them before He can do anything. We ought not to think this way – it has nothing to do with that. The Lord can act as He wills, and He certainly has the power to heal people without faith. But what He also wants to do is to show the connection between faith, forgiveness and healing. Faith is that which unites us to the Lord Jesus Christ, it is only when we are united to the Lord Jesus Christ that our sins, by faith, are forgiven. And the ultimate consequence of forgiveness is healing. And that is the reason these things go together.

The Lord Jesus also discerned the lack of faith, the unbelief, on the part of the scribes. Verse 8. Their hard human logic which they tried to keep to themselves, but He knew exactly what they were thinking. Such insight into the Father’s will and into the hearts of men, this is something that only God could know. And the Lord Jesus shows His divine nature in all of these actions – in forgiving, in healing and also in discerning the hearts of men.

As you would know, many deny that the Lord Jesus ever claimed to be divine. There are many people who think this was made up by the followers of Jesus. Liberal Christians often think that way. Jehovah’s Witnesses think that way. Muslims think that way. So let us see in the second place what Jesus claimed about Himself.

Now I dare say if He only claimed to be a prophet, the scribes and Pharisees wouldn’t have been quite so upset. They might not have liked it but they might not have been quite so angered. Because a prophet can say, if God gives it to him to say it ‘’God will forgive you’, or ‘God has forgiven you’. He can say that if God has told him to say it. Nathan said it to David in 2 Sam. 12:13. A prophet can also pray for the healing of someone. Elisha did so with the Shunamite son in 2 Kings 4. And a prophet can also foretell that someone will be healed. Elisha did so with Naaman in 2 Kings 5.

But the one thing that a mere prophet cannot do is to say ‘I have the authority to forgive your sins’. He can say God will forgive your sins, God has forgiven your sins, but he cannot say ‘I will forgive your sins’. A prophet can say ‘God has decided to heal you, God will heal you’, and he can be an instrument for bringing about that healing, but he cannot say ‘I have the authority to grant you that healing myself’. And so what we see here with the Lord Jesus Christ is clear evidence that He claimed to be far more than a prophet, He was a prophet, the Great Prophet, but far more than that, He claimed to be God.

And the scribes knew exactly what He meant when he said these things. And they knew it better than the Liberals do of today. Better than the Jehovah’s Witnesses and better than the Muslims do. They knew very well that the Old Testament said there was only **One** who has the power and authority to forgive sins – to forgive all of the sins of a sinner – and that is God. And we read that in Isaiah 43, especially in Verse 13 “I, even I, am the Lord and there is no Saviour besides Me”. That is the implication of that. And it is also in that same chapter in verse 25, and similar in Daniel 9:9. We read in the Old Testament that forgiveness is something that **belongs** to God. It is the property of God. We see in both the Old and the New Testament that forgiveness is something that is tied up with the very name of God, which represents His character. Exodus 34:6ff – “the Lord, the Lord, compassionate” – we prayed on that basis in the congregational prayer.

And therefore, the scribes concluded that the Lord Jesus must be blaspheming because who can forgive sins but God alone, Mark 2:7, and they didn’t believe He was God. The Lord’s response to that, knowing their inward thoughts, certainly does not distance Himself from this Old Testament truth that only God can forgive, He certainly did not say to the scribes or the crowd gathered here ‘Look, I understand that some of you here are thinking that I am claiming to be divine because I said I can forgive sins, look I didn’t mean it that way, let me explain to you what I did mean’ – the Lord does nothing of that kind. On the contrary He embraces this truth in a way that demonstrates that He clearly is, and claims to be, and knows that He is the living God, Who alone can forgive sins.

He asks the scribes, which is easier, forgiveness or healing? Perhaps the scribes thought to themselves that anyone can claim that they have forgiven the sins of another person because you can’t prove it. It is an empty claim generally, you can never prove it one way or the other. But healing would be more difficult because it is something that you actually see with your eyes, or not, that is verifiable in a visible and scientific way.

That’s a very human and a wrong way of thinking in reality both healing and forgiving are equally easy for God. But only for God. He is the only one that forgive in this way, He is the only one who can heal in this way, and He is the only one who can bring the two together into that connection to deal with man’s problem. Since the two are connected as mentioned, the Lord tells them that He has the authority on earth to do both. He has the authority and the power to forgive sins and the authority and power to heal the paralytic. He demonstrates that by following the forgiveness with the miracle of healing.

As we have noted before with the miracles of healing of the Lord Jesus, you see the same divine power that created the world out of nothing by simple word – God speaks and things happen. Simply because of the power of His word. And we see that here. All it takes to bring this complete and total restoration of health for this paralytic man is three short sharp commands – get up, pick up, and go. And simply the power of those commands you get this complete healing, immediately. And you see here that the Lord Jesus is assuming His own quiet claim, His own divine power and authority by the fact that He simply commands this to take place, rather than getting down on His knees and pleading with God in heaven if He would answer the prayer and grant healing.

The Lord also identifies Himself as the Son of Man. Which was His favourite self-designation. And that too is a claim and title that He takes to Himself. It means that He is more than a human being ‘ **A** Son of Man’ would mean a human being. ‘**The** Son of Man’ means a human being like no other. And not only so, the term comes from the Old Testament. It comes from Daniel 7:13,14 where it was a term for the Messiah, One who would come from heaven. Certainly not an ordinary man, or a mere man. One who would come from heaven. One who would be given all dominion, glory and a kingdom in the last days in the fulfilment of time – to use Mark’s expression – and these are terms that speak of divine authority. The authority and the glory that transcends anything that is appropriate for a human being. If one could even hold that amount of power. The kind of authority that can forgive, and heal, and rule.

Far from shying away from the charge that only God can forgive and therefore, Jesus is blaspheming, He claims this for Himself as a messianic prerogative. Because He is more than man – He is also God.

Of course, the question people need to be confronted with today is not so much ‘did Jesus claim to be divine?’ some do argue about that, but what they really need to face up to is this – what are you going to do with the fact that He **did** claim to be divine? It’s a far better way to put it to people. And we see two sets of reactions to that in the passage here. Our third and final point – how people responded.

First response, and we’ve seen something of this already, is the scribes’ reaction. It is a hostile reaction. Mark is showing us the reaction of the Jewish leaders against Jesus in its very, very beginning. At the early stage, where it is still hidden in their hearts, not hidden from God, but hidden from other people by their silent hostility. And Mark chapters 2 and 3 is a section of Mark that goes on to show and summarise how that hostility grows. Its starts because the scribes had a presupposition, they had a basic assumption, that God simply cannot be allowed to break into human history. You cannot allow God to take on human flesh. You must keep God way up there somewhere, above the clouds or in some other dimension, keep Him away as far as you can, because a God who gets down and gets involved in His creation, and brings men into His presence, such a God is far too dangerous. He is dangerous most of all to those who have no mediator.

In addition to that the Jewish leaders tended to believe that they were already saved by their own good works and righteousness. And so it is an offence if this Jesus comes along and He begins to say ‘your sins are forgiven’ – what sins are you talking about? – our sins are already covered by our own good deeds. Why do we need to hear this kind of stuff? On these presuppositions the Lord Jesus simply cannot be allowed to get away with saying ‘your sins are forgiven’. Something that only God should be, at the best, but a God kept at a distance. And as for His ability to heal, well, that must come from somewhere else, perhaps it comes from the devil, we certainly don’t want to admit that God has come into this world and is present in our midst to heal, or that men are sinners who need to be saved by him. That was a Jewish way of thinking, but modern man is not that different. According to modern man’s mentality, Jesus also cannot be allowed to be divine, He is only a man. And man’s sin is not so bad that he really needs forgiveness. And when Jesus says ‘son, your sins are forgiven’, isn’t that condescending, isn’t that self-righteous, isn’t that nonsense and offense to modern man from his point of view. And as for the healing – we know how superstitious people were in those days. They believed just about anything and it was very easy to trick them, to fool them, and in our enlightened scientific age today, we know far better than that, that such things don’t happen and if they did they’d need to be better verified that this. And if we are going to look for such things we would rather turn on the TV and watch Dynamo do them – that’s the mentality of the modern man.

Actually, the arrogance in that picture is modern man, and it is not the arrogance of the Lord Jesus saying to someone who would have been around his own age, saying to him, ‘son, your sins are forgiven’. The arrogance is of the modern man, and the arrogance is of the ancient man, who thinks that he doesn’t need forgiveness. And the arrogance of modern and ancient man who thinks he has the right to judge the Son of Man, the great and glorious Messiah, who has all the nations at His feet, who has a kingdom that spans time and this entire universe.

Those who think that way of the Lord Jesus, who reject Him in this way, will certainly sing a different song when they see Him in His Messianic glory and are forced to bow the knee before Him and see His terrible wrath.

Contrasting reaction is from the majority of the crowd, at least at this point. They were amazed, verse 12. Luke 5:26 says they were also filled with fear. Fear of God, and they glorified God. They said ‘we have never seen anything like this before’. They had seen healings before from Jesus, they had seen exorcisms before from Jesus, according to Mark 1. But they had not before seen this combination of forgiveness of sins and healing together which showed the divinity of Christ. No wonder they were fearful as well as astonished because now they were learning that God was in their presence. They were in His presence after all.

That is certainly the reaction we should have today. The fear of God, the awe of God, the reverence of God. Glorifying God rather than rejection and hatred and assumptions that you can’t be allowed to do this or that or operate in this way in this world. And of course, all of us would say that we do fear God. We do have that awe and reverence. But then of course, we have also heard these stories many times before. We have heard these accounts about healings, and it is easy to hear them and to react too little. And not that we disagree with it, but a long time ago in our Christian life we lost, at least a fair proportion of the amazement at these things. And the fear is diminished accordingly.

Moreover, perhaps I can put this in terms of a question - which would amaze you more as you have experienced church life – you pray for yourself or someone else who is very seriously ill, the congregation prays and suddenly and unexpectedly that person recovers. People really take note of that. Do you take more note of that, is there more surprise and amazement at that, than every day when you open up your Bible and read about the forgiveness of sins. Which of those two things ought to amaze us more? Well surely both together. We ought to be astonished every day when we read the Bible and think about this, that God is so compassionate and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness and truth that He sent His Son into the world to say to the sin of man – those who turn to Him – “sin dismissed”. That is what the word ‘forgive’ means here. Sin, you are dismissed – GO. And that He did that for those people who are caught in rebellion and in sin against Him. And not only that, that He is in the process of saying to the misery that follows from our sin – ‘misery banished’. He is in the process of that so that sooner or later that too will happen.

What is **your** response as you read each day of these things in the Bible, and especially of the mercy of God? AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, we pray that You would cause us to dwell daily on Your mercy and not to take it for granted. We admit that though we often speak or sing of Your amazing grace, the truth is we are not as much amazed as we should be. Father, we thank You that in Your mercy You redeem the whole man, You have dealt with the basic problem of sin and You are dealing now also with the consequences. Bringing forgiveness for sinners, even in this life sometimes physical restoration, but certainly at length, the restoration of the whole universe and our bodies along with it. We thank You that You do so through the Lord Jesus Christ, through His power and authority and through His saving work, and we thank You in His name. AMEN