

The Scripture passage given this morning is from Mark 2:1 and following. It also coincides with the passage studied in Sunday School classes after worship, so please refer to it as you wish. The Lord Jesus was traveling throughout the regions of Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. Amidst this, the account here records what happened when Jesus returned once more to Capernaum and was at home. This house in Capernaum may have been the home of Simon Peter, who became Jesus' first disciple. If you look at the previous verse, chapter 1, verse 29, on the right-hand page, you will find the account of Jesus visiting Simon's house and healing Simon's mother-in-law, who was suffering from a fever. It says she recovered and entertained them all. Hearing this, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or possessed by evil spirits. The whole town gathered at Simon's house. It seems likely that from then on, Jesus stayed at Simon's house as his lodging while carrying out his ministry in Capernaum. Verse 1 states, "It became known that he was at home," but it does not specify whose house. The nuance of the original text implies "it became known that he was at home." When entering Capernaum, it is highly probable that this house of Simon served as Jesus' lodging.

After several days, Jesus returned to this town. Word spread that He was now at the home of Simon the fisherman, and a large crowd gathered there. People filled the area around the doorway, and the crowd was so large that many could not enter. In verse 2, the phrase "the word" carries the meaning of "that word"—the original text includes the definite article, akin to the English definite article. It means something like "that word." Probably, whenever the Lord Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, He always spoke these words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel." Wasn't that what He proclaimed wherever He went? Then, at that very moment, four men arrived a little late, carrying a paralytic. He was probably about the size of a tatami mat. He was carried on a stretcher, supported at the four corners by four men. However, the house was packed with people, leaving no room to enter. So, the four men climbed onto the roof, made a hole in it, and lowered the sick man down to meet Jesus. In Palestine at that time, it was common for houses to have an external staircase leading up to the roof. Roofs were flat and often used as places for rest or prayer (Acts 10:9). This roof was constructed by laying branches between the beams and covering them with clay to harden it. Houses were built using wood or stone for pillars and wood for beams. Therefore, the task of removing this roof was not as arduous as it might be for wooden houses in our country. It was simply a matter of removing the clay filling and making an opening. However, this occurred while Jesus was speaking in the hall on the first floor. Mid-sermon, a noise was heard above. Soon, clay began falling in clumps. Looking up at the ceiling, they saw the sky, and from there, a man was being lowered down. Jesus was astonished. The worship service must have been interrupted. Verse 5 says, "Jesus saw their faith." Faith is invisible, yet it is said that he saw it. The four men, driven by an astonishing zeal and an unexpected action—tearing off the roof—were determined to bring this sick man to Jesus at all costs. Perhaps they cried out, "Help him! Heal him! Please!" Jesus saw their faith. Who were these people? They included the four men holding the stretcher at its corners and the paralytic himself. But it wasn't just them. I believe it also included the homeowner who permitted the roof to be torn open. He was willing to have the roof destroyed for this man's healing.

When I studied at the Faculty of Theology at Seinan Gakuin University in Fukuoka, I spent my first year as a ministerial student serving at a church in Saga. That church had experienced a period around 1970, known as the era of church strife, when various disagreements arose between the pastor and the congregation, leading to a time when church members stopped attending worship services. I entered in 1981, and the person who served as the interim pastor for the church's reconstruction was Professor Kazuo Nakamura from the Faculty of Theology. Every Sunday, I rode in Professor Nakamura's car along the road to Saga. He called the scattered members at home, visited them in person, and humbly pleaded for them to return to worship as they once did, all for the church's restoration. As a result, four adult members returned to the church. When these four resolved to rebuild the church under Professor Nakamura, they made a mutual promise to each other. That promise was the story from today's Gospel of Mark. Just as the four men lowered the paralytic through

the roof from the four corners to bring him to Jesus for healing, they vowed to become one of the four who would support this church from its four corners. Even now, over 40 years later, those words remain unforgettable. Members of Kurigasawa Church, please become one of the four who support this church from its four corners. The church does not belong to the pastor. It does not belong to any specific person. Each individual is a protagonist, and together we all build up the church. The church is called the body of Christ. If a part of the body, say a single tooth, is missing, or a toenail falls off, it is a major concern for that person. The church is the same. Each person possesses their own unique character and gifts, and these are treasures for the whole church.

However, the central message of today's story lies in Jesus' next words spoken upon seeing this event. What did he say? Verse 5: "Son, your sins are forgiven." Here, the word 'sin' appears for the first time in this Gospel. Its meaning is profound. The four men expected healing from his illness. They thought Jesus would say, "Son, your illness is healed." But Jesus declares forgiveness of sins to this sick man. Why? Incidentally, the reason he is addressed as "Son" here is because it was the custom among rabbis of that time to call those they accepted as their disciples "Son." Jesus was accepting this sick man as his disciple. This declaration of forgiveness of sins is suddenly uttered in a surprising manner. This was not because Jesus saw this sick man as particularly sinful. Nor was it because Jesus, following the ancient Jewish view, believed human sickness and suffering were punishment for sin. Here, sin is spoken of in a much broader sense. That is, Jesus was addressing the sick man's true "salvation."

There was a man named Mizuno Genzo. He passed away in 1984, but he is known as the "Blink Poet." Though he became unable to write with his hands or speak with his mouth due to cerebral palsy, we know that he touched the love of Christ, was kept alive by the Lord's mercy, and continued to sing songs of thanksgiving. This poet wrote the following song. It was written when he reached his thirty-third year with cerebral palsy. "Thirty-three years ago when I became paralyzed, I blamed God. But when I learned it was to touch Christ's love, it turned to thanksgiving and joy." This poet is never under the dominion of worry, sorrow, or illness. Instead, he is placed under Christ's dominion and now lives in thanksgiving and joy. He sings that even the suffering and pain that assail him day and night cannot separate him from Christ's love.

In 2 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul writes: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" It seems to have been a weakness so severe that it caused him to be despised by others—perhaps an eye disease or seizure-like symptoms. It was, in a sense, a major obstacle hindering his gospel ministry. Yet when he prayed for its removal, Paul heard the Lord's words: "My grace is sufficient for you."

Such salvation must also come to this paralytic. That is, the "forgiveness of sins" spoken of here means that both the human body and soul are made whole and healthy before God, and are freed from destruction. We become God's own and live with God. That is the salvation Jesus proclaims. Physical healing is only part of that forgiveness of sins—that is, salvation. In other words, even if the body remains unhealed, even if there is a thorn in the flesh, if one lives within Christ's love, that person is saved. Grace is victorious. Therefore, "salvation surpasses healing."

We are sustained by God's word and live by God's word. Whatever path life may take us, we wish to walk guided by the light of the Lord, relying on today's words from the psalm: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." In these uncertain times, we do not wish to stand paralyzed and lost.

I pray for you.