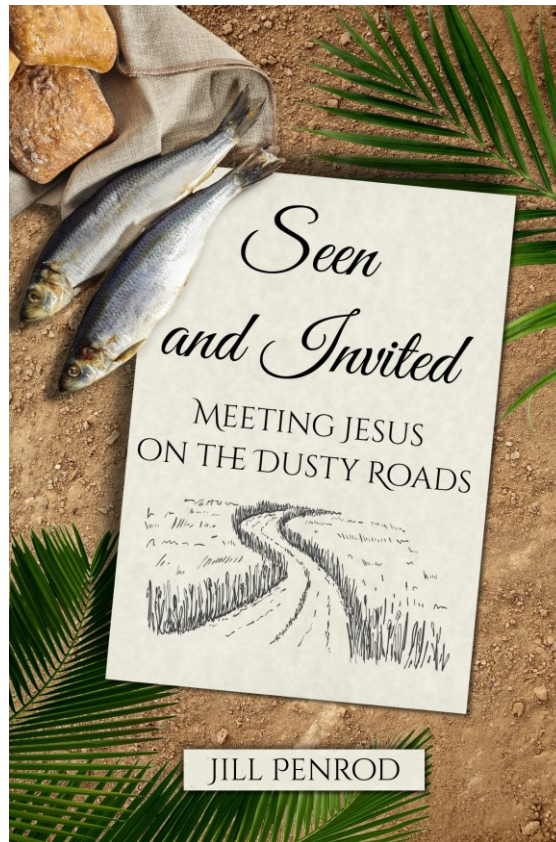


Sample Chapter

Seen and Invited: Meeting Jesus on the Dusty Roads

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Chapter 1: Proximity Matters

Proximity Matters

We start on this dusty road with a well-known story. In fact, most of the stories we'll unpack are familiar, children's stories told by most every Sunday school teacher. Miracles and healing are concrete and easier to explain to a child than the complex teachings of Jesus, so for many of us these stories are comfortable and known, like curling up in a worn chair with a mug of hot chocolate on a cold day. Remember, for me this journey started as a little girl, so feel free to invite your own inner little girl or little boy to read them with the wonder of a child.

But we're older now, more cynical, more worn. Don't worry, because Jesus came to a tired, worn people. When he came onto the scene, Israel had gone four hundred years without a prophet. No son of David was on the throne. Israel had lost her autonomy, her heritage, her hope. Spiritual leaders were as cynical as the people: Pharisees creating their thousands of traditions hoping to force God to send the Messiah; Sadducees who believed this tired life was all the life a person would have; even priests who didn't always wield their power with care.

Your older, tired, broken self is exactly who Jesus meant to find on the broken road, and he hoped to replace that tired soul with the joy, excitement, and faith of a child. So whichever self you bring to these stories, know Jesus will tenderly speak to you.

It begins with the tale of a man lowered through a roof.

When my youngest son was small, this was his favorite Bible story. What child doesn't love a story with some well-meaning vandalism? It's every child's dream. So we'll start here, because if we can't look at this situation with a smile, I think we miss something important, and Jesus loses a little dimension. I lived too long with a flat version of Jesus. Let's reinflate him back into a three-dimensional, fully human, fully divine soul who walked our roads and yet did it differently, better.

Luke tells our story this way:

Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. ¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

²¹ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

²² Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? ²³ Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? ²⁴ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ²⁵ Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. ²⁶ Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today." Luke 5:18-26

A Little Well-Meaning Vandalism

Let's start with the part that made your younger self smile. First, this is probably Peter's house. Mark tells us this happened in Capernaum, and that Jesus had come home. Matthew 8:14-16 takes place in Peter's home in Capernaum, and many scholars agree Jesus normally stayed with Peter when in Capernaum. If you don't know much about Peter, he tended to be the voice of the disciples. He was

loyal, stood up for Jesus, and occasionally said bombastic things hoping to prove himself to Jesus. It wouldn't be a surprise that he offered his house when the group stayed in Capernaum.

So we have Peter's house filled to the brim with people. Mark 2:2 says it this way: *They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them.* I wonder what Peter's wife thought about this. Or his mother-in-law, who likely shared this home, as well. The event must have been loud and chaotic, the air in the room tight and smelling of too many overwarm bodies. Maybe Peter waffled between pride at seeing his home used by his beloved rabbi and frustration, because a loud, dense crowd might not be careful of a person's possessions.

That all paled, though, when someone began to tear up the roof. I'm sure everyone realized this was happening. Recently our roof lost half its shingles in a windstorm, and when things happen on a roof, it's not quiet. If Jesus was teaching, the group might not have been moving much, and all eyes shifted up in surprise.

I wonder if the room got silent. Did Peter look at Jesus in wonder? Did he hope Jesus would stop this? It was his house, for crying out loud. Would Jesus let people tear up his house?

I can't help but imagine Peter's look of baffled frustration, followed by Jesus's reaction, which I imagine was a smile. Maybe more than a smile. Maybe Jesus bent over in a full belly laugh at the ingenuity of these men and Peter's waffling reaction. Jesus's ministry was still new. His disciples hadn't yet seen the full range of wonders, but at this moment they knew following Jesus was something unique.

So the crowd steps or scoots back to keep from being knocked down by a man lowered from the roof, and the man ends up on a mat at Jesus's feet.

Forgiven First

Here's where we move from the children's story to the adult version. When we see where this man ends up, we see something that will be a hallmark of Jesus's ministry from here to the end. Jesus healed people one by one. Those closest to him were given his attention, his care, and his miraculous invitations to wholeness and healing.

What these men had already learned from watching Jesus this short time was that proximity mattered.

I've thought about this a lot in my life. Jesus had three years to make such an impact on the world that we still talk about it and learn from it two thousand years later. Three years isn't long. He could have healed many, many more people if he'd walked to the entrance to each city, held up his hands, called a little thunder, and healed everyone in town in one sweep of his arms.

But that isn't how he did it. He looked at each individual person. Jesus's ministry as a shepherd required him to chase down and rescue each lamb from his or her own briar patch, his or her own crooked road, his or her own raging river.

Back to our man at Jesus's feet. Jesus had to look down to focus on him. Right now, I want you to look down. Your range of vision shifts, doesn't it? At the moment you can see very little, just what's on the floor below. The same happened here. For a moment, Jesus saw nothing but this man whose friends had broken all kinds of protocols of hospitality, torn up a roof, and dropped him here.

This man was loved by his friends. Jesus knew their desperation and their devotion, and his heart went out to them, to all of them.

He opens the conversation with this man speaking words that cause a stir, because Jesus was in the habit of causing a stir. Remember, he had three years. He couldn't blend into the crowd. He also couldn't blend into the crowd because he was the Son of God, the first and only Son of God to show up. Everything he did happened a little differently than expected.

His words might have disappointed the man on the mat as well as the men looking down from the roof, but now that we know the whole story, they are the most precious words in the world.

As Matthew puts it, When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, *"Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven."* Matthew 9:2b

They expected a healing. That's what they'd come for. They'd torn up a man's roof for it. Instead, Jesus grants forgiveness. Was Jesus able to do that? Was it real or just words? Those in the room had no way to know. Jesus was still new on the scene. Yes, his healing wasn't normal, but to take on the role of the priests, especially granting forgiveness to someone who didn't speak of repentance... This wasn't quite right.

The Pharisees in the room called Jesus on it. Yes, a priest could offer forgiveness to someone who came repenting and asking for it, but that hadn't happened here. They weren't exactly wrong to question a new rabbi who granted forgiveness like a priest.

Jesus has to look up. That moment between Jesus and the paralyzed man snaps, and the crowd comes back into focus. I wonder if Jesus was standing or seated in this scene. Had he squatted low to speak to the man? Had he touched him? He'd called him son and told him to take heart. For one brief moment the man thought this was it. He had the attention of the rabbi. He was here at his feet, as close as he could get. And yet, this hadn't gone as planned.

A Blood Promise

Jesus now speaks to the crowd. One thing to remember in our journey with Jesus is that he lived with an audience. And again, he had this limit of time. Everything he said and did was efficient and spoke to many people at many levels. This story is no different. He has a lesson for Peter as his house is dismantled—*Be patient, Peter. These lambs are the most important thing in the world to me. Let them come however they need to come.* He had a lesson for the men on the roof—I see your friend. Your faith

speaks to my heart, and I love this broken man as much and even more than you do. And he has a message for the spiritual skeptics.

That message was that the authority to heal, which Israel hadn't seen in ages, spoke of deeper things. It spoke of Jesus's authority to forgive. I doubt any of them understood what that meant, what price Jesus would pay to buy that forgiveness. When he forgave that man, he spoke of something horrible in his own future. It wasn't a ritual of a priest, but instead a promise of blood and tears from Jesus's own life a few short years down the road.

Jesus promised that man the very blood in his veins. And nobody realized.

Jesus started with forgiveness to get their attention, to hear them grumble, to once again turn the expectations of the tired, frustrated, confused Israelites on their heads.

But he also started with forgiveness because that's the road to wholeness for the broken people on the road. Proximity to Jesus and rightness of relationship with Jesus—what's more important than that? Everything in our spiritual walk hinges on those two things. The man's friends helped with the first. Jesus himself offered the second.

Because nobody understood the promise in the words and the future agony they would require, and because Jesus loved this man and his friends and even the skeptics in the room, he follows up by doing what they hoped. Again he turns his attention to the man, and he orders him to get up, take his mat, and go home. He does, praising God all the way.

The crowd must have parted to let him out. His friends must have scrambled off the roof, laughing and hugging and dancing through the streets. Their friend was healed. Their rude risk had paid off.

The man was also forgiven. Jesus told him to take heart, to have courage. He called him *son*. Those moments when Jesus looked down into his face, maybe crouched at his side, when the crowd fell away and the rabbi gave him full attention—those moments would stay with that man forever. He would remember the Pharisees' complaint. He would remember Jesus saying he had the authority to forgive sins. A few years later, when this rabbi was killed and a new sect appeared speaking of his resurrection, this man would stop and listen.

I doubt the forgiveness part mattered for a while. Having a working body would take center stage. And that's okay. When Jesus finds a broken soul on the road, what he does might take time to process. He doesn't want to heal us in part. He wants us whole. True wholeness is about the entire person, about body and spirit and soul. As we'll see more than once, Jesus hesitates to heal the body and leave it at that. And as many of us know, sometimes he doesn't heal the body at all, but that doesn't mean he doesn't make us whole.

When the man rose and left, the crowd joined him in praise. This was a glorious moment. It included smiles and laughter. Surprise and awe. A little frustration on the part of the Pharisees, I'm sure, who lost some points here. I wonder if Jesus resumed teaching that evening. If so, the words had taken on new meaning in light of the healing they'd witnessed. Or did this open the door to more healings that night?

We'll never know, but we can assume the whole flavor of the gathering changed at that moment, and it never quite changed back.

Seen and Invited

The theme of this book is being seen and invited by Jesus, so we have to ask some questions. What did Jesus see that day? What was his invitation? What can we see here two thousand years out from the story with our cynical, tired eyes? What does this have to do with my broken road?

Jesus saw a man whose friends loved him. He saw a crowd that had no reason to believe he was anything more than a regular rabbi, a spiritual teacher. Israel had plenty of those. He saw a disciple who offered his house and ended up with a hole in his roof.

Jesus got closer, then, and saw a man whose spiritual needs surpassed his physical needs. He gathered that man in his spiritual arms and gave him the ultimate gift, forgiveness of his sins, knowing that was what the man needed for complete, eternal wholeness. He knew what those words would cost him, and he was more than willing to pay the price to complete this broken man.

What was his invitation? How was this man—and everyone in the room—changed by this encounter? The man, of course, walked away. Everything in his life changed. After this, perhaps he found a job. Perhaps he had a family. His relationship with the men who'd carried him surely changed, as now they would walk together and visit together in ways they never had before. Balance in those relationships was restored.

For everyone watching, Jesus invited them to understand his authority. Jesus the prophet wrapped his message in the actions of Jesus the shepherd. Likely that wasn't the only time Jesus healed that evening. Many were invited into the same situation. Jesus looked eyes with many broken souls. He took time with every one of them, and for a moment each one who found himself at Jesus's feet was given a smile, a word, a touch. For each and every soul, the story was different. Imagine the people of Capernaum comparing stories for days.

"He touched my hands when he healed them."

"He smiled at me. Did you see that dimple?"

"He called me son, even though I'm an old man."

Jesus came to Capernaum, staying in a fisherman's house, and touched many people. Each walked away with the invitation to trust this man, to see his authority, to taste the forgiveness of God given a human voice and a human touch.

Pulling it together

That's what can happen for you on the road of brokenness. Remember that it starts with proximity. You must make your way to Jesus's feet. You can walk or run or crawl. Maybe you need someone to lower you through a roof. But likely you'll find proximity through simpler means. Open the Bible and read the words. Pray. Worship with other believers. Whatever you do, stay close.

It's not a new thought. The Old Testament writers speak often of being near to God or in his presence. Try these on for size:

Surely you have granted him unending blessings and made him glad with the joy of your presence. Psalm 21:6

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. Psalm 84:10

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. Isaiah 40:11

The sentiment continues in the New Testament:

Come near to God and he will come near to you. James 4:8a

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. Ephesians 3:16-17a

Proximity matters. Being close to God, close to Jesus, basking in his presence, dwelling in him... When Jesus was here on earth, people did crazy things to get close to him. We are asked to do no less. Get close. Cling. Dwell. Wholeness comes when we get close to Jesus, when we allow him to be our dwelling place, our fortress, the shepherd who leads us, the one to whom we bring our heartbreak and wounds.

If you're on the road of brokenness, start by sidling up to Jesus. Get as close as you can. He won't push you away. No, he'll look you in the eyes, crouch at your side, draw near, and gather you in. Along the way he'll see your needs—which aren't always what you expect—and invite you to live in new ways.

Unfortunately, being whole isn't always easy. Let's walk a little further down the road of brokenness and see a few consequences of being made whole.

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Release Date: July 16, 2024

Where to Buy: Hard cover and paperback only at Amazon; ebook at all major digital distributors and several library systems

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