

A WITHERED HAND AND SHRIVELLED SOULS!

www.thebiblejesus.com

And a man with a withered hand was there ... and Jesus said to the man, "Stand up in front of everyone! ... Stretch out your hand!" ... So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other ... But the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus (Matthew 12: 9, 13-14; Mark 3: 3; Luke 6: 8-10).

The healing of the withered hand is remarkable for many reasons. For starters, the man did not approach Jesus for help. He just happened to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath the day Jesus walked in. How shocked he must have been when Jesus commanded him to, "Stand up in front of everyone! ... Stretch out your hand!"

How would you feel if you had a deformity and were suddenly *commanded* to stand up in front of an audience? I mean, you have probably had years of social conditioning where people have stared at you sideways or even worse. And now you are thrust unexpectedly into the limelight, the centre of glaring attention --- something you have always tried to avoid. What embarrassment!

Luke tells us it was the man's **right hand** that was **shrivelled** (Lk 6:6). ^(1) This meant that in all probability he was unable to work for a living and relied on begging. Indeed, there is a story written years afterwards noting that he had been a stone mason by trade. At the very least he would have felt self-conscious with poor self-esteem. ^(2)

Meaningful work gives a certain purpose and energy to life. Begging robs one of dignity. After years on welfare, a person may become so dependent that all initiative for self-improvement ebbs away. There is a certain security in social welfare. The atrophied hand was the outward sign of a sapped soul, so it was Jesus who had to take the initiative.

So much for the withered man with the withered hand, but this miracle is remarkable for other more pressing reasons. The consequences of this healing proved most dire for Jesus, for, according to the 'keepers of the gate', Jesus failed their test question: **"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"** Having restored the man with the withered hand the Jewish establishment --- both the religious and the political --- **began to plot how they might kill Jesus**. Jesus had thrown accelerant upon the flames of their murderous hostility! ^(3)

¹ ξ η ρ ά ν (xēran) is literally a "dry" hand. It is from a base word meaning scorched, hence, arid and shrunken. It was a shrivelled hand, atrophied and wasted away by paralysis.

² *The Gospel According to the Hebrews* says the man said to Jesus, "I was a mason seeking a livelihood with my hands: I pray thee, Jesu, to restore my health, that I may not beg meanly for my food."

³ By comparing the three synoptic Gospel accounts of this incident, we learn that it was the religious authorities consisting of the Scribes and Pharisees who consulted in an unholy alliance with the political party of the Herodians. When religion and politics join hands look out!

THE CONTEXT

Matthew, Mark and Luke all put this healing after ‘the grainfields incident’. Jesus’ disciples had been picking heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were indignant. To their way of thinking this was “harvesting”, doing forbidden work on the Sabbath. Imagining they were the custodians of the Law, they felt *they* should determine how the Sabbath must be observed.

But Jesus swept the rug from under their feet by a devastating use of searing logic and appeal to their own Scriptures, ending it with the outrageous claim that as the Messiah he was the **Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12: 8)**. This was not only an open declaration to having greater authority than the Jewish religious establishment --- *it was supremely a claim to being greater than the Divinely given Sabbath itself!*

SOMEONE OR SOMETHING GREATER THAN THE TEMPLE?

As if this wasn’t “in your face” enough. Jesus then went on to say, “**But I tell you that someone greater than the temple is here**” (Matt. 12: 5). Imagine how outrageous that sounded to a devoted Jew! The Shekinah Glory of Yehovah dwelt in their temple!

Without getting too technical, we must note that this reading is not the best attested. Many commentators believe the stronger textual evidence should read, “**But I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.**” (⁴) If this is the case, then Jesus is arguing that the nature of his God-given Kingdom-work *far surpasses what God did in setting up the Temple worship!*

Jesus might be thinking rather of the *kingdom* than of the king; a greater *interest* is involved here, that of the kingdom of God. (⁵) He was insisting that a new and greater development-thing-person has arrived at this point in history, something not there before. (⁶)

Either way --- whether **someone** or **something greater than the temple is here** --- the authorities were aghast at Jesus’ shocking claim. A little reflection on what the Sabbath meant to the Jews will drive home how dangerous this was for Jesus. It was not the way to win friends and influence the influencers!

JEWS WOULD RATHER DIE THAN COMPROMISE THEIR SABBATH OBSERVANCE

The Sabbath day was given to Israel directly from Moses under God. Devout Jews would literally rather die than break it. In the Apocryphal book of **1 Maccabees** certain Jews and their wives and children defied the tyrant **Antiochus Epiphanes** and fled into the desert.

⁴ For the more technically minded, the difference is between the masculine $\mu \epsilon \iota \zeta \omega \nu$ /*meizōn* in the *Textus Recepticus* or the neuter $\mu \epsilon \iota \zeta \omicron \nu$ /*meizon* of the great majority of the better attested MSS.

⁵ *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, Edited by W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., LL.D., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI., Vol. 1, 1956, p182

⁶ *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Revised Ed., General Ed’s, Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, Vol. 9, Zondervan, 2010, p325

They took refuge in caves. This history happened about 150 years before Jesus and every Jew was familiar with it ...

Antiochus sent an attachment of soldiers to the defiant Jews who were refusing to give up their religion. The attack was made on the Sabbath day. **1 Maccabees 2: 31-38** reads that **Antiochus'** forces;

In great number pursued after them, and having overtaken them, they camped against them, and made war against them on the Sabbath day. **Antiochus'** men offered the Jews clemency saying that if they would return and obey the king's orders, then their lives would be spared ... "You shall live."

But they said, "We will not come forth, neither will we do the king's commandment, to profane the sabbath day." So **Antiochus'** army attacked with all speed. However, the Jews answered them not, neither cast a stone at them, nor barricaded the places where they lay hidden, but said, "Let us all die in our innocence: heaven and earth shall testify for us, that you put us to death wrongfully."

So they rose up against them in battle on the sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people.

The insurgent Jews died without lifting a single hand in defence because to fight would have broken their holy day!

At a later time **Pompey** was able to capture the impregnable city of Jerusalem because every Sabbath day his men were able to construct huge mound works without a single shot being fired at them because the Jews insisted on keeping the Sabbath. These battlements at last overlooked the city's walls with the Romans gaining height advantage.

Every Sabbath day **Pompey** built his mound-works without suffering a single casualty. Not a shot was fired at his workers on any Sabbath. **Josephus**, an eyewitness to it all wrote;

And had it not been for the practice, from the days of our forefathers, to rest on the seventh day, this bank could never have been perfected ... (**Antiquities, 14: 4.2**)

During times of extreme national emergency, the Jews were ready to suffer and die horrible deaths rather than break their Sabbath.

NOT AN ARGUMENT OVER *MINUTIAE*

Some commentators suggest that Jesus was confronting the Jewish leaders because they had drowned the Sabbath in a multitude of suffocating regulations which weighed the people down and robbed them of its real purpose and pleasure. The **Mishnah** laments that, **the rules about the Sabbath ... are as mountains hanging by a hair ... (Hag. 1: 8). (⁷)**

All Jesus was doing, they insist, was trying to get everybody back to the basics. Jesus only wished to get rid of all the man-made traditions which had crusted over what God Himself

⁷ The technical term for these additional regulations is *halakhah*.

had intended for their good. True, all four Gospels make it clear that Jesus did argue with the Pharisees over the right use of that day. But there was more at stake here than winning an argument about **halakhic** disputes.

Careful attention to what comes before the healing of the man's withered hand shows *the confrontations concerned Jesus' fundamental messianic claims*. Did Jesus have the *authority* to do what he was doing on the Sabbath? In reply Jesus appealed to various arguments to justify his approach to the Sabbath. (⁸)

A. Jesus appealed to Scriptural precedent for his disciples picking corn on the Sabbath: David and his men ate the **consecrated bread** to satisfy their hunger --- something only lawful for the Levitical priests to eat. Jesus thus showed from their own Scriptures that human need trumps even sacred observances.

Furthermore, Jesus demonstrated from the Scriptures that even the priests themselves **desecrate** (⁹) the Sabbath by performing their work on the Sabbath. Jesus argued that he and his disciples were doing Kingdom-service, so could not be profaning the Sabbath.

B. Jesus appealed to the doctrine of man's special creation and uniqueness over the animal kingdom. The healing of the withered hand is the third time in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus argues on the basis of a contrast between animals and humans (**Matt. 6: 26; 10: 31** and here at **12:11-12**). Having asked Jesus their test question, "**Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?**" Jesus replied;

"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

Believing as he did that God created man in His own image, Jesus would not have made a good Darwinian evolutionist. He did not believe in the myth of goo to you via the zoo! He posits the superior value of humans over birds and animals based on our special creation as image-bearers of God. Jesus did not believe mankind was the result of "natural selection". He believed in our "special creation".

C. Jesus appealed to the superior morality of the Golden Rule. God requires more of His children than *not* doing evil. To see what is needed and not help out when it's within our power to do so, *is* evil. Not to save life *is* to kill. The Christian faith requires more than a negative abstinence from evil. It requires an active seeking to do good.

D. Jesus appealed to the character of God his Father. God is more interested in **mercy** than the outward forms of religion --- even if they are the very sacrifices He Himself has required (**Matt. 12: 7**).

⁸ I have treated this in more detail in the series of articles *Should We Keep the Sabbath?* and particularly, *4. Jesus and the Sabbath*.

⁹ "Desecrate" in **Matt. 12: 5** is variously translated as "profane" or "break". It comes from a rare word in the NT (only appearing once more in **Acts 24:6**) from a base word that means "permitted to be trodden" [**β ε β η λ όω /bebēloō**].

Mercy in the Old Testament often means the compassion of God as it does in the New Testament (Luke 1: 50), or of Christ (Jude 21) (¹⁰)

The rabbis, of course, did permit healing on the Sabbath provided life was in danger. (¹¹) But if there was no danger to life they mandated no healing work was to be done. They reasoned the man with the withered hand was in no immediate danger, so Jesus could have waited till Monday for his “work” of mercy.

We also know that the Scribes and Pharisees were goading Jesus in this case. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Matt. 12: 10). Jesus’ answer demonstrated God’s heart ... there is no time or place so sacred that it cannot be used for helping another in need because this is the heart of God.

We will not be judged by the number of church services which we attended, or by the number of chapters of the Bible we have read, or even by the number of hours we have spent in prayer, but by the number of people we have helped, when their need came crying to us. (¹²)

E. Jesus appealed to the authority his Father had invested in him. As the Messiah, Jesus was Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12: 8). Jesus was claiming more than the right to tamper on the edges of halakhic regulations. Taking authority over the Sabbath had to do with Jesus’ fundamental messianic claims --- nothing less than the claim to being the Son of God.

As already noted, immediately prior to the healing of the withered hand Jesus had emphatically said, “But I tell you that someone/something greater than the temple is here!” (Matt. 12: 6). Jesus is the Substance who fulfills the shadow (see Col. 2: 17).

THE LORD’S POWER IS IN HIS COMMANDS

I imagine when the Lord told the man with his shrivelled hand to “Stretch out your hand!” that his immediate thought was, “Are you kidding me? Why do you mock me? Can’t you see how useless and powerless my hand is? It’s paralysed, man!”

But no sooner had Jesus’ command been given, than, wonder of wonders, he felt a surge of new power to obey. Perhaps a warm tingling sensation --- as many have since testified when they have been touched by the healing power of God --- began to throb through. He *could* stretch out his hand. There was power in the word of Jesus to obey.

Friend, this is a timeless principle in the realm of God. Whatever the Lord requires of us to do, He always supplies the ability as soon as we set out to obey. In God’s economy, weakness always precedes strength --- that’s a spiritual law (2 Cor. 12: 9). (¹³) So ...

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1992, p303-304

¹¹ E.G. Whenever there is doubt whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath (Yoma 8: 6).

¹² William Barclay, *Gospel of Matthew 2; The Daily Study Bible*, The Saint Andrew APress, Edinburgh, 6th Impression, 1967, p 34

¹³ Some point out that it was only the man’s hand that was withered, and not his arm. Therefore, they argue, he would have been quite able to stretch out his hand without the need for effort or new power. However, it’s a medical fact that a hand unused naturally leads to withered arm muscles.

When He asks us to be his witnesses in a hostile world, we may feel a withering sense of powerlessness inside. But as occasion arises and opportunity presents, as we open our mouth, His power will course through our lips (Matt. 10:19).

When the Lord commands us to rejoice always in Him and He tells us not to be anxious about anything, but in everything to pray and make our requests known to Him with thanksgiving, then no matter how depressed and overwhelmed we may feel, we will find that as we obey, His presence will surge into the situation (Phil. 4: 4-7). Rejoicing in the Lord when we are swamped by our circumstances is the last thing our dry and shrivelled souls want to do. But as we begin to obey, we find the Lord faithful to His word. Faithful is He who calls us who will also do it (1 Thess. 5: 24).

When the Lord commands us to love one another as he has loved us, when he tells us to forgive one another as he has forgiven us --- fully, freely, for all time --- we may rest assured he will give his enabling. Nursing the hurts will only boomerang back to shrivel our own souls. Surely it's better to obey and bless others and in the process heal our own withering souls?

Oh, the curse of a disobedient and withered soul! There have been occasions in my own life when someone in need has touched my heart. I felt the urging of the Father's heart for that person. But it meant I would have to change the plans I had already determined on, or I would have to part with the last dollars in my wallet. My negligence led to a loss of the joy of the Spirit's anointing and presence --- a shrivelled soul! If only I had always obeyed, oh how I would have experienced more of the power his blessed word creates!

Miracles are released only as we begin to obey his commands --- even when we distinctly feel no ability to. So, stretch out that dry soul and obey whatever He commands. Only then will you know the power of God in your life!

THE IRONY OF IT ALL

The healing of the withered hand on the Sabbath only increased the disgust and enmity of the religious leaders. Forthwith --- Sabbath notwithstanding --- they went out and began to plot how they could destroy Jesus. Apparently, it was not okay to heal and do good on the Sabbath, yet evidently it was fine to plan a murder!

Blinded by legalistic piety they imagined they were doing God a service! And as happens with anybody who rejects the claims of Christ upon their lives, they were the ones who ended up with blighted lives.

The other ultimate irony is that Jesus healed the withered hand, not by *doing* anything --- he simply spoke a word, thus supplying no shadow of a reason, even by their own standards, for any charge against him.

No wonder Jesus **looked around at them in anger and was deeply grieved over their stubborn hearts (Mk. 3: 5)**. What a beautiful blend of emotions from the Lord: Justifiable anger mixed with heavy sadness of heart. Oh, how he loved those petty shrivelled souls!

A PRAYER

Heavenly Father,

Forgive us for when we have limited Your mercy and power by our own silly rules.

We now bring our dry souls to You for cleansing and healing so that we may glorify You by blessing everyone You bring into our sphere today. We know You will now make good Your promise that, **faithful is He Who calls us Who will also do it (2 Thess. 5: 24)**. As we obey your word, Your power is made perfect in our weakness!

We pray this in the Name of Jesus Christ Your Son who is **Lord of the Sabbath** and of every single day of our lives, and especially of the Glorious Day when Your Kingdom comes.

Amen.