

## CHRIST'S POWER TO RENEW WITHERED LIVES

Mark 3:1-8

Near the close of the second year of our Lord's earthly ministry dark clouds were gathering about Him. There was a widespread interest in His preaching. While "the common people heard Him gladly", the rulers were bitterly opposed to Him. They were against Him because He failed to meet their cherished views of the Messiah. They expected Him to come in a royal manner, but Jesus was the son of a carpenter. Another reason for their opposition was His denunciation of their pet sins; for, in spite of their ceremonial sanctity, they were given to usury, uncleanness and a general disregard of the spirit of the law. They despised Him because He was "the friend of publicans and sinners." But the crowning offense of Jesus in their eyes was His contemptuous disregard of their Sabbath precepts. The Sabbath was their fetish, so they had added numerous and burdensome requirements with which the Lord Jesus had no sympathy nor patience.

Our scripture lesson contains the record of a very interesting and instructive miracle which was wrought by our Lord on the Sabbath, and which offended the prejudice, and increased the hostility, of the Pharisees. On that particular Sabbath, Jesus entered a synagogue, in a place which is not mentioned by name, in order to participate in its worship. In the large group assembled there was a man with a withered hand.

We do not know much about this man. Probably he was there in the hope of meeting Jesus, of whom he had heard many things, and of whose habit of attending the synagogue he was aware. It is also quite probable that he was a regular attendant at the synagogue, notwithstanding his disability. He might have heard about the wonderful cures Jesus had wrought, and have come to the synagogue on this particular Sabbath hoping to receive healing from Him. Without understanding the reason for it, it is quite evident that his hand was withered and useless. It appears that the man had suffered from infantile paralysis or some kindred trouble. His condition may have been the result of an accident, or of some contracted disease. He could not extend his fingers or grasp tools of any kind.

We do not know what caused his hand to wither. It could have been the result of sin. In I Kings 13 is a record of a man's arm withering because he lifted it against God's purpose. Jeroboam was angry because God sent His prophet to interfere with him. When he raised his hand in defiance against God and ordered his officers to arrest God's prophet, instantly his arm withered and stood out helpless so that the wicked king could not even drop it at his side.

This story of Jeroboam and the story of the man with the withered hand are typical of what we can see about us every day in the higher realm of the intellectual and spiritual life. One of the saddest things we see is the withered lives of men and women who, highly endowed of God and fitted to be of great influence and power to bless men and women about them, have dried up, and, though not yet buried, are living in a state of withered uselessness.

Two things about this man are impressive — his disability and the fact that he sought the place of worship. When Jesus entered that synagogue His attention was immediately drawn to this man whose hand was atrophied. He was moved with compassion toward this poor working man, whom tradition says was a stone-mason, who had lost the use of his right hand, and with it all hope of ever being a useful member of society again. In the eyes of the Saviour, the most appealing figure in that whole assembly was that laborer whom no

employer would ever think of hiring. There may have been many people of importance in the synagogue that day, men of means, men of culture, and men of influence, but only one was selected for the Master's favour. And it was not his greatness that attracted Christ's attention, but his weakness. His only claim to notice was his need. He was a cripple. The concern of the Saviour is not with the man who is whole and who has need of nothing, but with the poor, the friendless, the afflicted, and the outcast.

Likewise, our most attractive feature in God's sight is our need. How many of us would fain be distinguished by other things — wealth, culture, rank, etc! But the Lord is not looking upon the outward appearance. If we catch His sympathetic eye, it will not be because of any of these things. Our sure claim to the Divine compassion is the fact that we are crippled, or blind, or bowed down beneath burdens which we cannot bear.

This cripple realized his need. He could not help doing so. There was so much that he could not do. He not only realized his need, but he utilized his opportunity. Jesus entered the synagogue. If any soul be right with God, His presence is that soul's greatest joy; and if any soul be wrong with God, His presence is that soul's greatest chance. When the man with the withered hand stood in Christ's presence, he typified sin. Sin always impoverishes, weakens, and saps the strength. We have seen the grass withering away because of the hot sun; so it is, whenever sin sweeps down upon us, it tends to wither us, until it leaves us altogether without the power of action. Sin breaks down our resistance; it hinders our conquests. He is also the picture of a fruitless life. A withered life makes us think of the fruit tree whose fruit shrivels up, and never matures.

Many dry up and wither away into uselessness for lack of ideals great enough to keep them alive. Man cannot live by bread alone. He cannot feed his soul on the husks of material things. He must have higher food. Man must ever be climbing higher and higher, aspiring to still nobler conduct and achievement, or he stagnates, withers up and loses his vital life. This truth is forcefully emphasized by Browning in his heart-searching poem, THE LAST RIDE TOGETHER. The poem is a love story. The lover has just put his fate to the test and his suit has been refused. He asks the woman whose love he had sought as the crowning glory of his career to take one last ride. She consents and as they ride along together he begins to meditate. He is face to face with the greatest defeat of his life. He had thought that life without the love of this woman a complete failure. He says to himself, "It is a complete rebuff; I have failed." But he reflects, "Have the greatest men who have achieved the most splendid things in life caught up with their ideal?" "Why, no," he answers with awakened interest and hope. "If a man catches up with his ideal it tends not to growth, but to stagnate and wither up his life." And so he goes on to ask questions. Who are the men who have achieved success? Then he challenges all the great poets and asks them, "Have you ever caught up with your ideal?" "Why, no indeed! Every time I write a poem I can see how I can write a better one, and that is the stimulant and inspiration and the rapturous joy of my life." Human nature is made up on such a divinely heroic plan that to catch up with your ideal does not bring happiness, but disappointment.

The man who accepts the ideal of Jesus Christ will find himself ever climbing and achieving and yet never reaching the summit which inspires him to go onward and upward.

When he went back to Africa the last time David Livingstone, who blessed every continent on which he set his foot, wrote this letter to his little twelve-year-old, motherless boy:

"Dear Tom: I am soon going off from this country, and will leave you to the care of Him who neither slumbers nor sleeps, and never disappointed any one who put his trust in Him. If you will make Christ your friend, He will be better to you than any companion can be. He is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother. May He give you grace to seek Him and to serve Him.

"I have nothing else to give you. I have nothing better to say to you than to take God for your Father, Jesus for your Saviour, and the Holy Spirit for your Sanctifier. Do this, and you are safe forever and no evil can befall you.

"Hope you will learn quickly and well, so as to be fitted for God's service in the world."

And Livingstone went away in perfect confidence, leaving his little boy to the companionship of Jesus Christ.

That same Livingstone one night in Africa, was surrounded by warlike, savage tribes, and it seemed doubtful that he would be permitted to live through the night. But the good man took out his pocket Testament and read the marching orders of the Church and the accompanying promise, "And lo, I am with you always," and he closed the book, saying with a smile: "It is the word of a gentleman, and is not to be doubted," and lay down and slept in peace.

A life like that will never fade or dry up or wither.

In dealing with the man who had the withered hand our Lord gave two commands.

#### I. "Stand Forth."

1. This command was God's call to separation. When Jesus said, "Stand forth," He seemed to be saying, "Get out of the crowd, come away from your former environment." This is always the call of God.
2. This command was God's call to the negation of human aid. As long as the man stood in the crowd he would be tempted to trust in the crowd, to lean upon them, and to follow their suggestions. At Christ's call, he stepped forth, separating himself from them. He had come to the place where he had no hope in man. Man had never been able to heal him, or even to help him. He had no power, himself, to better his condition; and they, likewise, had no power. We have gone a long way toward victory when we are willing to repudiate human aid. So long as we think we can do it, or that some one else can do it, we will never find victory.
3. This command was God's call to perfect trust. As Jesus said, "Stand forth," and the man stood forth, he found himself in the position of being thrown wholly upon the Lord. As he walked away from the world, and from man, he was prepared to follow Jesus.

Stand forth into the midst meant publicity. The one seeking salvation is required at the outset to make a frank acknowledgment of sin and an open confession of his belief that Christ can save him. "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

#### II. "Stretch Forth Thine Hand."

That was a human impossibility. The unfortunate man might have said, "I cannot do what you tell me; all the vitalities of my hand are dried up, and I am powerless to do as you wish." But he did not speak thus. He tried to do as he was told, and with the effort to obey Christ came the glad power. Christ enabled him to stretch forth his hitherto helpless hand. Christ never makes an unjust exaction. He always gives power with the effort to obey him. Think of the joy which must have filled that man's heart when he saw that his withered hand was well and strong. It was cured because he fulfilled the condition, which was faith and obedience.

No great stretch of the imagination is needed to see in this narrative a picture of man's spiritual state. The Gospel of Jesus not merely tells us what we ought to be, but gives the power by which we actually become that which it requires. Man is told to repent. He is told to believe on Christ. To receive the benefits that Christ is ever waiting to bestow, there must first be a consciousness of need, or a conviction of sin. Then there must be an act of the will. Faith is shown in doing what he commands, even when it seems to be impossible.

After the performance of this miracle, this man became a vehicle.

1. A vehicle for the blessing of men.

Dr. Chalmers used to say: "You may be a blot, you may be a blessing, but you cannot be a blank." And who wants to be? Do you want to be a vehicle of God's blessing to men? Then become a miracle of His grace. Trust Him and obey Him, and you shall go out to be a vehicle of blessing to men. Only God can measure what can be done with your life if you will hand it over to God's service and God's control.

2. A vehicle for the glory of God.

When the man looked at his hand which the Lord Jesus had restored, he was impressed with the fact that it was well because Jesus had cured it. Out of gratitude to Him for this wonderful miracle, he resolved to use it for the glory of the Lord. While there were enemies of the Lord who resented His performing this miracle, there was a great multitude who followed Him just because of what had been done for this man. Thus he became a vehicle of glory to the Lord. And I can conceive of no finer thing, no more glorious aim than to be a blessing to men and to bring glory to the Lord. Do you want to do that?

Withered, sinful, discouraged man or woman, your only hope is in Jesus Christ. But there is all the hope you need. He who has power on earth to forgive sins also has power to restore your withered life and make the desert blossom like the rose. He can fill the boughs of your life, so long withered and barren, with new blossoms and new and delicious fruitage beyond all your dreams. Come to Him now!