

SM043 The Crooked Woman

It was the Sabbath in Israel. Jesus and his disciples had arrived in a village a few days earlier and met the elders of the village and the synagogue official. They had heard of Jesus' fame as a teacher and healer and asked him to teach in the synagogue that day.

On the way to the synagogue, Jesus greeted the people as they walked with him to the simple building in the village where God's people gathered to worship and to hear the promises of the coming kingdom. Jesus loved them all and he rejoiced to walk with them to worship his Father in heaven. As he walked, he noticed a woman who was making her way to the service very slowly and with great difficulty.

"What is her name?" he asked one of the villagers.

"Her name is Rebekah, she has been a life-long resident of our village but people generally have nothing to do with her."

"Why do they have nothing to do with her?" Jesus asked.

"Jesus, can't you see? She can barely walk. She is bent over nearly double. She has been this way for eighteen years."

"Eighteen years!" Jesus exclaimed.

"Yes, eighteen, but it wasn't always that way. She used to be young and beautiful and was the desire of every eligible man in the village. Then one night there were screams in her house. There was shouting. We could hear voices from the house, her voice, "please don't do this, please leave me alone." Her parents thought she was crazy. And from that night on she could never walk straight, the light from her face was gone and year by year she bent over more and more, like a terrible weight increasing with each year. Now she can barely walk. She is bent over almost double. We call her the crooked woman."

"Has anyone tried to help her?" Jesus asked.

"Help her?" the man asked. "We think she is possessed by an evil spirit. We think she is cursed by God. We tolerate her and she insists on coming to the synagogue, but I don't think there is anything we can do for her. This is her fate in life. She did something wrong and God has given her over to this sickness."

Jesus was quiet. His heart was grieved, grieved for the woman, grieved for his people, and angered over the foolish way of thinking that **God** was punishing his people and God was the one putting them into bondage. Yet, here she was faithfully on her way to worship God!

They passed by the village well. There some men, including the synagogue official were hurriedly taking water from the well back to their homes.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" Jesus asked.

“We don’t want to be late for the services, but we have to take this back for our animals to drink. Don’t be alarmed Jesus, it will take only a minute to lead our animals to their watering troughs so they can drink.

Jesus smiled and waved as they hurried back to their homes but his heart was troubled again. They were so eager to meet the needs of their donkeys and oxen, to give them a drink on the Sabbath, yet there was old Rebekah, and no one was offering to help her as she slowly made her way to the synagogue while others passed her by.

Finally, they arrived at the service, all except Rebekah for her walk was so painfully slow, yet the synagogue official wanted to start even though he was out of breath from hurrying after giving his animals water to drink.

The service began. The synagogue leader said, ““Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

They recited the Berakot – the 18 benedictions all beginning with “Blessed”. These were praises to God.

“Blessed be the Lord God, the father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Blessed be the Lord God for His power and might.

Blessed be the Lord God who alone is holy.

Blessed be the Lord God who grants wisdom and understanding.”

On and on they went with their praises to the Lord. When they finished the 18 benedictions, they read from the Law of Moses and from the prophets. Then it was time for one of the men to teach. Because Jesus had already been welcomed into the village and because he was the guest of honor and his fame as a teacher was well known, he had already been asked to speak.

Jesus began, “God has given us his law as an act of mercy. The nations of the world have gone astray in their sin. They live in darkness. But God has given us his Law that it might shine upon us, bring us into the freedom of loving God and loving one another, and that through us the light might shine upon the nations.

“Today, we have given our praises to God in many ways. We have confessed our loyalty to him. We have praised him with the Berakot, these 18 statements of praise that honor him for his greatness, that honor him for his creation, that honor him for his covenant with us, and that honor him for his promises to his people.”

“Today, we have read from the prophets and we have rejoiced in the promises of the kingdom. Our hearts rejoice that the kingdoms of the world will not prevail but that God’s kingdom will prevail over the whole world. The earth will be free. The earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord, just as the waters cover the sea.”

The people were agreeing with every word Jesus said. They loved the conviction, the power, and the authority with which he spoke. He did not teach like the other rabbis. The words of Scripture seemed to be only tired, old words when they spoke. But when Jesus spoke, the words of Moses and the Prophets came alive like they had never heard before. Power came from him such as they had never experienced.

Jesus continued, "Our God is a God of deliverance. Our God is a God of compassion. He has sent me to the afflicted, not with a message that they are cursed. He has sent me with good news for those who are poor and afflicted that their suffering is now over. God has sent me to those whose hearts are broken – not to remind them of their sins – of what caused their brokenness, but to heal their broken hearts. God has sent me to those who are captive to release them from their captivity. God has sent me to those imprisoned in shame and doubt and fear, to bring them out of their prison house into the light of God's favor and love.

"Did not the prophet Isaiah say to all who **mourn** in Israel, that God himself will give a crown of beauty for the ashes of sorrow, that he will give a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. God will make his people who are bent over in their suffering to become like great oak trees standing tall, that he has planted for his own glory."

Just at that moment, the synagogue door loudly creaked open. The synagogue official looked with impatience at this annoying disturbance and all eyes turned to the door to see who was interrupting this magnificent, inspiring sermon from the lips of Jesus. Now who do you think it was? That's right. It was old Rebekah, the crooked woman. She had finally made it. She had finally finished the long walk from her home on the edge of the village, painful step after painful step, bent over double, hardly able to make eye contact with another human. She was late, but here she was to meet with God's people, to worship God, and to remember his promises.

The crooked woman felt ashamed. She knew she was late. She knew all eyes were upon her. The silence of the synagogue was shouting curses upon her for being there, for being late, for interrupting these amazing words of power and authority from Jesus. And, as was often the case, she expected to be reprimanded and reminded of her crookedness, her curse and to be put in her place to the back where the other women sat.

But this day would be different because Jesus was there. He looked upon her and with a heart bursting with love and compassion he said,

"Woman, welcome."

"Welcome?" Was Jesus welcoming the crooked woman? This woman who really did not belong? This woman under a curse? Was he welcoming her? She had not heard a word like this for many years. Welcome?

She turned her crooked body painfully towards the front of the synagogue and looked up and there was Jesus smiling at her, his hand extended and she heard him say, "Please come to the front and stand with me."

The woman did not know why he was asking her to come to the front of the synagogue but his reassuring smile and extended hand comforted her and she obeyed. Jesus met her at the front. He looked at the synagogue official who had a worried expression on his face. This attendant had heard stories of Jesus doing inappropriate things on the Sabbath and the controversy they caused. Surely Jesus would not repeat these mistakes. Jesus looked upon the crowds and some in the back began to stand to get a better view. They too had heard of Jesus' activities on the Sabbath and they did not want to miss what might happen.

And then Jesus, cutting through the tension in the air, said, "Woman, you are freed from your sickness." And he placed his loving hands upon her. The woman began to gasp and to cry as if she were in pain, yet not pain, but as if she were feeling great power surge through her body. She began to straighten up, bit by bit, inch by inch. The woman's back began to loosen and she began saying, "Thank you! Thank you! Thank You!" until finally she was standing up straight, like a great oak tree planted by the Lord and she stretched her arms and hands freely and as high as she could in praise to God and said, "I am free! I am free! God has loosened me from my bondage. I am free!" And she took Jesus' hands and placed them to her face that was wet with tears of joy.

The people began to clap and rejoice and praise God, but the synagogue official and some who were his friends were not pleased. His synagogue was out of control and he immediately walked to the front and said to the people,

"Silence! All of you, silence! There are six days in which work may be done. Work may not be done on the Sabbath. If you want to be healed, come to Jesus on those days but do not come on the Sabbath to be healed."

But Jesus looked upon this man and his friends and said, "You hypocrites. You hypocrites! I saw you today taking water to your animals, to your oxen, to your donkeys. They were tied up in their stalls and you loosed them and led them to find water to quench their thirst. God allows us to loosen animals from their chains and lead them to water on the Sabbath but we are not allowed to loosen people from their chains?"

"This woman, she is a daughter of father Abraham, a daughter of the covenant God has made with us, whom Satan has bound these eighteen years. God has not bound her. She is not under the curse of God. Satan has bound her these eighteen long years. Is it not right to release her from her bondage on the Sabbath day – the day we remember when God loosed us from the chains of Pharaoh?"

And when Jesus said this, the synagogue official and his friends became silent and hung their heads in shame. They were humiliated by the power and the righteousness of God in Jesus of Nazareth. And the synagogue worshippers began to rejoice and came up to the woman and embraced her with great delight for her new found freedom. She was back from her long years of exile in suffering from the evil one. Jesus had saved her.

Interlude

After Jesus healed the woman and after the people had expressed their joy over God's mighty power, Jesus had them all take their seats and he continued teaching.

He said, "What I have done for this woman is a picture of what God desires for our nation. Our people have been enslaved for centuries to the nations of the world. And we have longed for the coming of God's kingdom to free us from this slavery that has bent us over. But God promises that we will stand like a tall oak tree just as this woman now stands before you.

But in order for our people to stand tall, they must learn how the kingdom of God comes. For too many years our leaders have taught that the kingdom of God comes like a conquering hero, like a great general in battle with a mighty sword to pierce the bodies of our enemies. But the kingdom of God does not come like that.

"How does the kingdom of God come? What is the kingdom of God like? It is like a mustard seed which a man planted in his garden. We all know what a mustard seed is like. It is so small that we use it to talk about small things. We see small children and we say, "they are no bigger than a mustard seed." But what happens with time? That tiny seed grows and becomes the largest plant in the garden. Have you ever seen birds resting or nesting in a mustard plant? Yes, you have, and so have I. The mustard plant becomes huge and dominates the entire garden and attracts the birds of the air to its shade.

"The kingdom of God is the same way. It starts off small, like a mustard seed, but it grows in God's world and becomes the most dominant plant in God's world. This does not happen all at once. It takes time. But it will happen. And just as the birds of the air are attracted to the shade of the mustard plant, so the nations of the world will be attracted to the refreshing shade of the kingdom of God as it grows and becomes the most dominant plant on the landscape of God's world.

"This is what I have been teaching in Israel. The kingdom of God is here. The kingdom of God is among you. Today, the authority of God, his kingly rule has been shown in this one woman. He has released her and now she is free to stand tall, to live her life fully to God, and to bear much fruit for him."

Jesus looked upon those in the synagogue. He could see the people struggling to understand. For so long they had been led to think one way about the kingdom – that it would come suddenly, that it would come in big ways, that it would come to destroy sinners – this was so different, that the kingdom would come slowly, that it would come in small ways, and that it would come to save the needy.

Jesus took a deep breath and said, "Let me try to illustrate it this way for you. This woman, this daughter of Abraham, will return home and she will bake bread this week. In order to bake bread she must put yeast into the dough and then she must let the yeast do its work.

"The kingdom of God is like that yeast. Just as yeast is placed in dough and quietly does its work until the entire lump of dough is penetrated, so, in the same way God has placed his kingdom in the world in quiet ways, sometimes in secret ways, but it is working mightily to penetrate the hearts of people, to penetrate the hearts of families, to penetrate villages, and nations, and one day the entire world will be penetrated with the kingdom of God."

“This is what I have come to do. I have come to bring the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is here, now, and the prophecies are fulfilled, but it is here like a mustard seed, like leaven in dough but it is working.”

Jesus finished his message. He turned the service back over to the synagogue official who dismissed the people with a blessing and then he walked out and away from the village and toward Jerusalem.

As he travelled, he would often stop and speak to the crowds. On Sabbaths, he would speak in the synagogues and there he would teach the same message to the people about the kingdom of God, what it was like, and that it was now at work in Israel.

One day, a man in the crowd said, “Lord, when you teach these things, I am not sure that the people understand. We have been taught so differently that the kingdom comes with power and might and will crush the Romans and all the pagans. But you teach differently. I wonder, how many of our people truly understand you. Are there only a few who will be saved?”

And Jesus replied, “Strive to enter through this narrow door of the kingdom. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter God’s kingdom and will not be able because they are seeking for it in the wrong way. They will be like people left outside the party. The head of the house, the host of the party has allowed those who responded to his invitation into his house and a banquet has begun. He has shut his door and the party has started but those who spurned the invitation of the head of the house when he first invited them will say, “Master, please, open to us. We want to come into now. But he will say, ‘I am sorry. I don’t know you.’”

“They will say, ‘But Lord, we were with you. We ate and drank with you. We heard you teach.’

But he will say, “I tell you. I don’t know you. I don’t even know where you are from. Depart from me. For you have had evil in your heart and not a heart of love for the things of God.”

“I have come to Israel bringing the kingdom of God. I have taught the way of God in truth. But most have rejected what I have said and what I have done. They have rejected the kingdom I have brought. And when they see the kingdom advancing, when they see the mustard plant growing up, when they see the lump of dough rising and ready for baking to offer nourishment for all, they will weep because they refused to follow me.

“Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets will be in the kingdom – these very men who believed and passed on the promises of God – but these in Israel who are bent on revolution and picking up the sword and crushing the Romans – they have missed the kingdom, they will be thrown out.

The kingdom will spread to the whole world – the mustard plant will grow up and become the most dominant force in the whole world and many from east and west and north and south will rest in its shade and will eat the bread of the kingdom. They will recline at table in the kingdom of God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob while those who should have been in the kingdom because they first heard

me and saw me will be left out. The first will become last and lost. But the last and lost, those who have heard and believed and followed, will become first and they will enter.

Just at that moment some Pharisees who loved Jesus came to him and said, “Jesus, Herod is looking for you. He wants to arrest you. You should leave here.”

And Jesus said to them, “Go and tell that fox that today and tomorrow I cast out evil spirits and heal people – and then on the third day I will reach my goal. I cannot run and hide. I must bring the kingdom of God to the people, to those who will hear. I must complete my work in Israel. Even though only a few may understand what the kingdom of God is like.”

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God’s messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn’t let me. ³⁵ And now, look, your house is abandoned. And you will never see me again until you say, ‘Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the LORD!’”