

The Word and the Touch

F. B. Hole.

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"And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in nowise lift up herself. And when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity. And He laid His hands on her: and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God." — Luke 13: 11-13.

I want to deal as briefly as possible with a particular difficulty that affects many Christians, though happily not all. Some of us are naturally light-hearted, and manage to go on our way without much thinking of ourselves. Now that may be a danger. It is possible to go through life light-heartedly and miss the exercises that others have, and to lose the profit that these exercises yield. On the other hand, it is the tendency of some to turn in upon themselves and to be everlastingly scrutinizing their own feelings. They are always in a state of self-occupation, which neither tends to the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ nor to their own spiritual good.

If you are suffering as a Christian from being occupied with yourself you are like a man who is ever looking at his own feet and stumbling just because he does so. Your thinking about yourself does not produce the power you would fain possess. The more you search for it in your experience and in your service the less there appears to be.

Now this poor woman is a striking type of souls in your condition. She was evidently a child of God, and not an unconverted sinner, for the Lord speaks of her as *a daughter of Abraham*. There is a spiritual significance in those words, as we may learn from Galatians 3: 7, "They who are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham." This woman was a daughter of faith, for she walked in the steps of that faith which Abraham had, who was the father of the faithful. They are truly his children who follow in his footsteps spiritually, in other words, those who are believers. This woman was one of them, and the astonishing fact is that for eighteen long years she had been bound by Satan. From this we learn the power that Satan may have over one who is really a true child of God. In her case it was a physical infirmity. She was bent double, and so bent that she could see nothing but herself. You might perhaps go a long way before you find a Christian so wholly occupied with himself as to be unable to see anything else. Most of us have our bright times, when we seem to get away from ourselves. Then something happens, and we get again into the old rut.

Now the Lord Jesus was equal to this terrible case. The affliction which this woman had is spoken of as *a spirit of infirmity*, and the spiritual affliction of which I am speaking may be so described. Those who suffer from it seem to live always in the shade. They feel morally bowed down, and are occupied with themselves. They say, "I am such a failing creature and is it not right to be conscientious and to scrutinize my motives and my behaviour?" Yes, but it is not right to allow this to become a continuous process.

This woman came into the synagogue. It was the custom for men to worship in the main body of the building and the womenfolk in a gallery, behind a sort of grille. You will agree with me that a woman who "could in no wise lift herself up" was a most unlikely person to come under observation. But such is the beautiful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that she was the only person that He singled out. His eye rested on the sufferer. To her He said, "Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity." Then the Lord put His hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight and glorified God.

The same Saviour can deliver you from your unsatisfactory experiences or your fancied good experiences — the worst thing of all.

There are some verses in the Psalms which exactly describe this state. The Psalms give us every kind of experience. Sometimes we are carried down to the depths of despair. Then again we are on the mountain top, finding all our resources in God. Almost every experience that can be thought of may be found in the Book of Psalms.

Let us turn to Psalm 77: "I cried unto God with my voice, and He gave ear unto me." That is the theme of the Psalm. God did give ear. "In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord: my soul refused to be comforted." Evidently the Psalmist was passing through a very gloomy time. Then he makes this extraordinary statement: "I remembered God, *and I was troubled.*" This is not the experience that is normal to a Christian. Properly speaking, he would say, "I remembered God, and my heart overflowed with joy." Here he says, "I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed." He felt crushed beneath a load that he could not support. "Thou holdest mine eyes waking; I am so troubled that I cannot speak." He could find no words to express his inward misery.

If you met a man with a doleful face you would say, "You look very down to-day. What is troubling you?" Now the mind has a very great effect on the body. The Psalmist was so troubled that he could not sleep. He could not pray, and he hardly liked to talk to his fellow-men. What has he been dwelling upon? He tells us. "I have considered the days of old, the years of ancient times." People often speak of the good old days, and exaggerate the blessedness of them. He says, "I call to remembrance my song in the night." But that does not help him. He adds, "I commune with my own heart, and my spirit made diligent search." He was trying to find something to lay hold of as a source of happiness in the old days. What will that do for him? The next verse shows us. "Will the Lord cast off for ever? Will He be favourable no more? Is His mercy clean gone forever? Does His promise fail for evermore? . . . Hath He in anger shut up His tender mercies?" It seems to me as if these questions came out like a torrent, tumbling over one another. What is the man doing? He begins to judge God by his own miserable experiences? He doubts God. Will the Lord cast off forever? Wherever is there anything to give the smallest idea of such a calamity as that? He asks these questions: "Is His mercy clean gone for ever? Does His promise fail for evermore?" We can answer these five questions and say "No" to every one of them. He doubts God because of what he finds in his own wretched heart. Now that is the tendency of us all if occupied with ourselves. It may be that to-day you fear that you have deviated from the right path. The devil would like you to brood over that. It is right to confess this failing, but God desires that having confessed it you should have done with it, so that the happy link of communion between your soul and the Lord may be restored. The enemy would use these things to bend us double, to make us look morbidly within. Nowhere are we told to brood over our failures. We are told to confess our sins. God is faithful and just to forgive them, so that we may go on in communion and in power.

Is there any hope for a man like this? Look at verse 9 of our Psalm. That little word "Selah" marks a pause. Now stop and think. Think of the length to which a man will go in his doubting and questioning of God. Now the scales fall from this man's eyes, and the first thing he says when he comes to himself is, "*This is my infirmity.*" That is the very word that is used in regard to the woman in Luke 13. Lay hold of that, and it will do you good. The spell is broken as soon as we label the thing with its right name. God's way is that you should judge yourself, and condemn yourself in thorough accord with the cross of Christ, where all that you are as a man in the flesh was condemned. God's desire is that you should confess and be forgiven, and go on in communion. In the days when the Psalmist was looking within, he remembered God, and he was troubled. Now he says, "I will remember the years of

the right hand of the Most High. I will remember" — not "my own miserable failures," but — "the works of the Lord. Surely I will remember Thy wonders of old." He thinks of better things.

Just as there are caterpillars which always take the colour of the leaf on which they are feeding, so there are Christians who are always characterized by that upon which their minds are dwelling. If you dwell habitually upon mournful things, you will have a mournful face. Do you want to be happy? Dwell upon happy things. That is a simple recipe, but a very good one. Do you know how to be miserable? Dwell always upon that which is dark. You say, "There are plenty of these things, and are we not to recognize them?" Of course we should. But having confessed them to God, let us dwell upon the things that are good and right and blessed. Let us remember the works of the Lord. Let us remember His wonders of old.

And now the Psalmist raises his eyes to heaven, and he says, "Thy way, O God, is in the sanctuary. Who is so great a God as our God?" You would hardly believe it was the same man. His heart and mind are dwelling upon God, and instead of mourning about his own feebleness, he is rejoicing and praising God. "Thou art a God that doest wonders. Thou hast declared Thy truth among the people."

Well, thanks be to God, we can go a great deal further than the Psalmist. God had revealed Himself then in His greatness in creation, and in righteousness, but we know Him as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the God that we know, and in whom, through infinite grace, we may rejoice.

Now for one moment I take you back to the woman. How did the Lord produce this wonderful change in her, so that instead of always looking at herself she could stand upright and give glory to God? By His *word* and by His *touch*. These, I believe, are symbolic. What liberates our souls and sets us in happy liberty before God? It is first the *word* of the Cross. The gospel comes to us with a word of forgiveness. It tells us most emphatically that all who believe are justified from all things. No one in the world is, on God's side, shut out from this great gospel offer of forgiveness, but at the same time only they who come in faith and receive it actually have it. It rests in its efficacious and cleansing power upon all that believe. The gospel message comes to you pointing to the cross of Christ, not merely saying, "Behold in the cross of Christ the paying of your debt," but "Behold in the Cross the condemnation of all that you are in yourself." It settles not merely the question of the guilty things you have done, but of the guilty root from which they all come. The Cross is the great Magna Charta of the believer's liberty. I see the condemnation of all that I am in myself there. If I were speaking to some believer who has never yet stepped into this happy condition, I should say, "Here you are in this distressful condition. The cross of Jesus is the loosing of you from that dreadful clinging thing — *self*." Then came the *touch*. The Lord laid His hands upon her, and the work was done. There is the union of the two things, the word and the touch. You find in Romans 6 what answers to the former. There the cross of Christ is seen not only in relation to your sins, but to yourself. Then when you come to Romans 8 you have the indwelling Spirit, empowering us for happy occupation with God and with Christ. You can now go through this world upright and glorifying God. I look upon the word of the Lord as being similar to the word of the gospel that we have in Romans 6, and His touch as being symbolic of the blessed gift of the Spirit of God.

Well, may God grant that what has been said may be for the help and blessing of somebody. Since we have escaped the snare of the fowler, and are no longer in danger of hell, the adversary is set upon engaging us with something else rather than that which should normally occupy us. If he can get hold of a conscientious believer, and tie him up in a knot, if he can keep him always looking within, he

has gained a victory. He has spoiled that Christian, so far as his witness for Christ is concerned. That poor bowed woman would have been no advertisement for the doctors, but a scarecrow to frighten away any likely patient. It may be that if you are a Christian of this kind your unconverted friends will say, "Look what religion has done for him! Look what a face he pulls!" That is no advertisement for the grace of your Saviour. You are somewhat of a scarecrow to frighten anybody away who is inclined to turn their attention in that direction. The Lord wants you to be bright and happy, to be in the enjoyment of His love, to glorify God. It is not a great mark of saintship to be in this miserable condition. Let your heart dwell on the glories of Christ. and the fullness there is in Him, and the excellencies there are revealed in His word. The more you get your soul filled with these things, the happier, the brighter and more blessed it will be for you, and the more likely that those who see you will glorify God.