

## THE MAN WITH THE WITHERED HAND

BY ALLISON BOWN

<sup>1</sup>He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. <sup>2</sup>They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. <sup>3</sup>He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”

<sup>4</sup>And He said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent. <sup>5</sup>After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

<sup>6</sup>The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him (Mark 3:1-6, NASB).

### The Gospel of the Natzoreans, as quoted by St. Jerome

*“In the Gospel which the Nazarenes and the Ebionites use... which is called by most people the authentic (Gospel) of Matthew, the man who had the withered hand is described as a mason who pleaded for help in the following words: ‘I was a mason and earned (my) livelihood with (my) hands; I beseech thee, Jesus, to restore me to my health that I may not with ignominy [disgrace or shame] have to beg for my bread.’”*  
(From St. Jerome’s *Commentary on Matthew Book 2* on Mt.12:13)

*[Before you read Allison’s story of this man, you should know: Allison has a similar malady in her hand—and her husband is a stonemason! -Ed.]*

The crack of the block and the tumbling limestone, falling in slow motion... but faster than I could move. With my hand still gripping my chisel, the crushing was absolute.

“Noooo!” I shouted, sitting straight up from my mat, dripping in sweat. “No,” I sighed.

“Oh my dear,” said Rebecca with quiet compassion. “The dream again?”

“Yes—the dream.”

“I’m so sorry,” my wife whispered... but I had already turned over, facing away.

*The dream. If only it were a dream.* But the pain where I had laid too long on my hand while sleeping testified that my living nightmare was all too real. *If only I had seen the stone falling sooner. If I had just let go of my chisel... If... If only...* I drifted fitfully back to sleep.

The next morning, I hoisted my large, empty basket onto my back. “It’s okay Rebecca. Really, it’s okay,” I reassured her as I tenderly kissed her forehead. “I’ll be back in time for Sabbath.”

I arrived at the quarry to have my basket loaded with stones for the latest job. *At least my back is still strong.* Though a laborer’s wages are nothing like those of a master stonemason, at least it’s something. But the torment of that daily walk from quarry to work site eroded my hopeful resolve. *There...the beautiful garden walks I created for that merchant. The portico for the synagogue that I added... Once I felt pride in them all, and now they mock me.*

I tucked my crippled hand into my robe and lowered my head as I entered the worksite. “Head down, empty your load, get out of here as quickly as possible,” I whispered to myself. “I don’t need one more piteous or judgmental look today from the faces of those who once smiled with admiration.”

The dream didn't return that night, much to my relief... and Rebecca's. "You look good today" she ventured as we prepared to head towards the synagogue.

I smiled in return. *She has been so brave and kind these last five years. I don't deserve her...*

As we drew closer to the synagogue, a young neighbor woman pulled Rebecca aside and whispered in her ear. "What did she say?" I asked.

Rebecca's eyes were wide and somewhat watery. "She heard that Jesus of Nazareth is a guest today at synagogue. Jesus—the one I told you about, remember?"

My mind raced. *Yes, I remember*, though I said it only to myself. *Rebecca told me about this Rabbi who not only taught, but healed people. He has created quite a stir recently. The people seem to like him, but the Pharisees? Not so much. I wonder what he's here for?*

We were some of the first to arrive, but I still tucked my crippled hand into my robe. I always did when there was a crowd. From our place a few rows back, I watched as the others came in. Something was up for sure. "I wonder why the Pharisees haven't taken their places yet?" I whispered to Rebecca. "They're all huddled together. And there seems to be more here than usual."

At that moment, the Rabbi from Nazareth entered. The Pharisees turned as if suddenly finding their seats was of utmost importance. I found myself looking at one who sat directly across the room from me. *I know that look*, I thought to myself; *I know it well: thinly veiled contempt. People always think they hide it so well, but they never do. I wonder what the Rabbi has done that has offended them so?*

As the visiting Rabbi, Jesus was asked to read the Torah... and I was captivated. Jesus recited it so differently, so beautifully, as if the words were deeply meaningful to him. I was so focused, I forgot to keep my hand tucked away. Slowly, I realized that all the Pharisees were looking daggers straight at me. *But why?* I wondered, ashamed. *Did I do something wrong?*

Synagogue and Sabbath have always been my refuge. "It's the one place I don't need my hands," I had once told Rebecca. *But it doesn't feel like a refuge today. Something's not right.* The people had grown quiet during Jesus' discussion of the text. I looked up to see Jesus peering straight at me—*except his gaze isn't daggers. No, it's... inquisitive, kind, curious.* Then I realized he was staring at my hand. *Oh my God, no, he won't, he can't speak to me. Please don't speak to me!"*

But like the falling stone in my dream, what I feared most was happening before I could flee. Everyone—my family, my neighbors, the Pharisees—all turned to look at me. I knew before Jesus opened his mouth what he would say.

"Get up and come forward" the Rabbi from Nazareth said.

My legs felt like limestone. They had no strength to run away. But I felt Rebecca's firm hand under my arm, helping me to my feet. Her smile settled my shame... a bit. Her words, "Jesus doesn't just teach. He heals," formed vaguely in my mind.

But I didn't just have to stand. I needed to walk. Yet just as I left my place and Rebecca's faith thrust me forward, I looked at the Nazarene. He was welcoming, wanting me to stand with him. No one had ever done that... at least not since my accident. Jesus' eyes said "Come," so I did.

*This is beyond awkward*, I thought, as I reached the rabbi and turned to face the crowd, my eyes on the ground. Yet Jesus squeezed my good hand in his. As I tucked my other, disfigured hand back into my robe, he spoke.

“Is it the law to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or do irreparable harm and kill it?” At first Jesus’ voice sounded as if it were in a tunnel, until the question brought me back to the moment.

*Yes!* I thought. *There is only one answer they can give to that question! Of course we can only choose life, only do good on the Sabbath.*

Hope slowly began to dawn in me. *Maybe this is my moment! I know the Pharisees. They were my friends from school. We played together in the streets. This room is filled with my friends and family. I am SO glad that Jesus asked a question that would allow everyone to take my side. Maybe Rebecca is right: Jesus is going to heal me today, and everyone will rejoice.*

But what followed after Jesus’ words was not what I expected. Jesus slowly turned completely around, anticipating the same response as I did. But he met a circle of bowed heads. My friends and family couldn’t even look at Him. And then, Jesus met the gaze of the Pharisees. I looked up, and saw only defiance and hatred boiling out at us both.

My hope collapsed. *I’m done for,* I thought. *More than when the rock crushed my hand and destroyed my future. This last sanctuary is gone. Sabbath and synagogue are gone. Why? Why would not one person rise to say I deserve to be healed?* And then I saw my Rebecca, who was trying to stand, but held down by her mother and her sisters, all afraid of the Pharisees.

If the crushing of the block killed my hand, the crushing of this moment was killing my heart. *Why did I come today? Why had Rebecca hoped? I’ve learned to deal with the rejection of my fellow workers, but my entire town...*

And just when bitterness was rising up, I saw that the Pharisees who would not look at me couldn’t look Jesus in the eye, either. I turned to look at Jesus. His eyes were filled with tears and anger. Not just anger at the assembly, but anger *FOR ME*. Jesus had called me out, put me on center stage, and now realized He had opened me up to humiliation. I realized this wasn’t what He meant to do, and my heart went out to him.

Suddenly the world became very small for me. Time slowed down. No one was standing up for me, true, but no one was standing up for Jesus, either. I sure knew what that felt like! I knew what it was for no one to be able to look you in the eye. They were ashamed of Him! But in that moment, he looked at me—and *he* was not ashamed of me.

The room disappeared, and it was just the two of us. No one else here understood me. And no one else understood Him. But we understood each other. In that moment of connection, with eyes I will never forget, He said “Stretch out your hand.”

*Stretch out my hand. Put it out there for everyone in this room to see... the hand I have tried so hard to hide.... But how could I not?* No one in this room had spoken to support Him. No one in this room felt allowed to support me, so great was their fear.

But I knew rejection. I knew what it was to not be accepted. And so did He. So I stretched out my deformed, damaged, useless hand for everyone in the room to see, because this man asked me to... and somehow I believed that anyone willing to stand with me in that moment, could make me whole.

And He did! And I was. And I think that maybe Jesus paid a bigger price to heal me than I paid to be healed. *I hope He will be okay.*