**THINGS THAT MATTER MOST - DEVOTIONAL PAPERS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**10. WITHERED HANDS by JOHN H. JOWETT**

ALL the miracles of our Lord are purposed to be symbols of analogous works which can be wrought in the soul. "But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power" to heal and emancipate the spirit He restored a paralyzed body to freedom. He drove the palsy out of the body as a token that He could drive the palsy out of the soul. He could impart the same strength and buoyancy and agility to the one as He had given to the other. And so it is with all the miracles of our Lord; they are types of the "greater things than these" which He can work among the secret needs of the spirit. Here was a man with a withered hand. A legend comes along the centuries that he was a bricklayer, an ordinary working man, who had been reduced to impotence by the loss of the member he needed most. But his calamity had not embittered him or made him spiritually insensitive. He was found in the synagogue seeking communion with God. And there the Master met him and restored life to his withered limb, and he was whole again.

Now there are withered faculties of the soul. There are spiritual members that can become dry and impotent. There are mysterious hands which can lose their grip and even their power to apprehend the heights. And a diseased faculty can impair the strength of the entire life. It can check our spiritual progress, and impair the vigour of moral aspiration and service. And these withered limbs can be found in the Church. They are brought into the place of worship, and they are often taken out again withered and dead. We do not establish the communion with the Healer which insures the ministry of the irresistible forces of grace.

The faculty of love can be a withered hand. It can shrivel away until it has no strength, no reach, no hold. I suppose we may test the quality of love by the length and strength of its apprehension. How far can it stretch? What is the intensity of its grip? How long can it hold out? The people who have the strongest love have the fullest assurance of moral triumph.. It is sometimes said that money can unlock any door. The statement is the merest nonsense. There are treasure-houses, the most real and the best, that money can never touch. Love is the great "open sesame." A man with a fine love burns his way like fervent iron through ice. He pierces through every difficulty, and nothing is allowed to obstruct his way. "Love never faileth." But when the love itself begins to wither, like a limb that shrivels through lack of vitality, life is comparatively impotent. And how frequently we see this spiritual tragedy! "I have something against thee, thou hast lost thy first love." It is the disease of the withered hand. Something has happened at the very fountains of vitality, and love sickens and dies.

The faculty of hope can be like a withered hand. Think for a moment of a man endowed with brilliant hope, pursuing some personal quest or engaged in some social crusade. What power there is in his goings! What spring there is in the feet of a man who "feels the days before him"! The man who lays hold of the triumph of to-morrow has a mighty inspiration in the battle of to-day. The man who sees "the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" is a glorious labourer in the Jerusalem that is, seeking to transform and transfigure it into the light and beauty of his vision. The man endowed with hope is a magnificent worker. He sees the diamond in the carbon; he sees the finished garden in the desert waste. But if hope shrivels into despondency, or dies away in despair, how helpless is the man who touches the task! It is hope that fetches the bread that feeds endeavour; it is hope that sustains the life. We are "saved by hope." But let hope shrivel, and a dulness steals over the spirit; laxity and limpness take possession of the soul. When a man can say, "I have lost my hope," he is a man with a withered hand.

The conscience can be a withered hand. A live conscience gives a man a fine, nervous, sensitive, "feeling" touch of the mind of God. It gives a man a discerning apprehension of right and wrong. When the feeling is really sensitive, what confidence it imparts to life's movements, what firmness, what motion, what decision! But the conscience can be benumbed. It can become as unresponsive as a paralyzed hand. Common experience affords abundant illustration. There are many people who were once endowed with a scrupulous moral sense, and in some way or other it has lost its exquisiteness, and they no longer finely realize the will of God. The withering is made manifest in apparently small disloyalties. We do not sustain the sense of honour in the full round of common life. There are ministers who are intensely scrupulous about orthodoxy who are not equally scrupulous in more practical obligations. They shrink from heresy; they do not shrink from debt. I have known people deface other people's property by writing Scriptural texts upon it! They have a sensitive desire to serve the Lord, but their honour is not keen enough to make them respect the common rights of their fellows. And often the unscrupulous may degenerate into the vicious. Moral unsoundness is like every other disease, it can proceed from the apparent trifle until it corrupts the pillars of the life. Poison can begin with a pin-prick and may at length reach the heart. A withering conscience is an unspeakable peril. A withering conscience indicates that a man is dead.

The will may be like a withered hand. What a strong, pushful, resourceful hand it is when it is endowed with healthy vitality! But when it withers, everything is touched with irresolution and hesitancy. Nothing is initiated with power. Nothing is addressed with persistence. Nothing is accomplished with decision. A feeble will makes all life's doings anaemic. Everything is languid, from the sickly promise to the imperfect achievement.

What can we do with all or any of these faculties of the soul? We have only one resource. We can bring them to Him who made them, and who can remake them by the power of His grace. But we must bring them deliberately, naming the withered member in the presence of our Lord. We must bring them submissively, laying aside all presumption and pride. We must bring them obediently, ready and willing to carry out the King's decrees. If He orders us to attempt the impossible, we must attempt it. "Stretch forth thy hand!" The man might have replied, "Master, that is just what I cannot do!" "Stretch forth thy hand," and the attempt being made, the needful power was found, and the man was made whole. So must I bring my withered love to Him, and if need be I must "stretch it forth" in effort and service. If He bid me I must act as though I have a healthy love, and in the very effort I shall find I have received it. I must bring my withered hope to Him. At His command I must stretch it forth. I must act as a hopeful man, and I shall find that the gracious light is restored. The Saviour's power goes with the Saviour's demand. The Saviour's power is received in human obedience.