

21 August 2022

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

“You have not come to Mount Sinai, a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”¹

My letter’s words could well have been applied to a memorable Sabbath day, half a century earlier². I was one of those at worship in one of the synagogues that day when Jesus was teaching. In many ways it was a Sabbath day just like any other: we were about our normal pattern of worship, and there was nothing especially unique about it being Jesus who was doing the teaching – I had heard him before in other places, as had many others of course. But it became an extraordinary day for one woman in particular; and, through her, for many.

I don’t know if Jasher³ had been a regular at synagogue before: certainly I hadn’t noticed her there previously, and I’m not sure many others had either. It wasn’t until afterwards that I was to learn her name. She was seen around the village each day of course, but she certainly wasn’t one to push herself forward, keeping herself tucked in among the women, always staying near the back. She was always bent over; bent double; apparently quite unable to straighten. It was as if an invisible rope was tethering her to the ground, drawing her head ever downwards. I cannot

¹ Hebrews 12:18, 22-24. “Sinai” does not appear in the biblical text, but is clearly the mountain being talked of.

² The presence of the author of Hebrews at the occasion related in Luke 13 is entirely speculative: a narrative fiction for the purposes of this sermon. Further, dating of the book of Hebrews is much debated: ranging from just a year or two before the fall of Jerusalem in AD70 to about AD90. See Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 28-31; Duling and Perrin, *New Testament*, p.285.

³ The name of the woman is not recorded in the biblical text of course. I have chosen to call her Jasher because it means “upright”: see <https://thenamesdictionary.com/name-meanings/170490/name-meaning-of-jasher>

imagine the pain, discomfort, and fatigue she must have been under. I wonder if she had difficulty breathing, with her chest compressed, her heart having to work harder under that pressure.⁴ When I did finally see her that day – when Jesus broke off from his teaching to speak directly to her – she was unable to make eye-contact without awkwardly turning sideways and swivelling her head upwards towards him.⁵

Who knows what had caused her to be so bound. It seems it was more than just a physical ailment: Jesus was soon to refer to Satan. A physical condition can sometimes be a manifestation of something emotional or spiritual; and our emotional and spiritual condition can be affected by our physical state. We know that Satan works evil in many ways – maybe Jasher had experienced some direct spiritual attack, but just as likely her oppression had begun in persistent verbal abuse and physical punishment when she was smaller until her twisted up emotions communicated themselves to her body.⁶ Perhaps it came from oppressive labour over many years from youth; perhaps from a curse being put upon her by an unloving family; or maybe she had started to live into some lie repeated over her again and again – an unloving husband saying that she was unlovely. I heard later that she had been in that state for eighteen years. Eighteen years like that! Can you imagine?

I hadn't noticed Jasher until that day. But Jesus saw her. I don't know how or why: I suspect it was simply a work of God-given knowledge that he knew that she was there and in need of release – even if she had not come that day specifically looking for it. Jesus saw her; and he called her forward. She was uncertain at first; he gently encouraged her, and then she made her way to the front, the group of women parting to let her through. There were significant looks exchanged, and a little excited whispering: What might happen now? Why was Jesus singling her out? Might he do for her what he had done already for some others elsewhere?

And then it was done. At the front of the synagogue, before us all, Jesus said to Jasher, kindly and firmly, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." He put his

⁴ Sharp, "Commentary"

⁵ Schifferdecker, "Sabbath Healing"

⁶ Wright, *Luke*, 166.

hands on her, touching her bent back, and then ... well, and then she was straight – it happened in a flash. It wasn't as if she made some effort, drawing herself upright as if she had just put down a heavy load and needed to stretch her spine back into shape: Jasher *was made* straight.

We saw her, really for the first time, her face radiant as she immediately gave praise to God. "I sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. He has broken my chains and set me free!" It was as if Miriam were among us. The whole room was vibrating with awe and wonder and rejoicing.

And then there was a deflated hush as the synagogue leader's sneering voice cut through the buzz: "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." He was clearly angry: a breach of the Sabbath, at the synagogue, on his watch. This could not be allowed; and given that it had already occurred he had to make a clear stand lest our synagogue – and he – become a byword for laxness on this vitally important matter.

So now it was the rest of us who were looking at the floor, shuffling our feet, a bit shamefaced at our rejoicing. We were God-fearing faithful members, and here we had erred in our understanding of the Law – the *Holy* Law given to us from Sinai on an occasion so terrifying that even Moses himself trembled in fear.

Many of us, I think, recognised the rightness of the synagogue leader's words. While the Scriptures commanding Sabbath-keeping were brief, there are scrolls and scrolls of the rabbis' debates and rulings on how Sabbath-keeping was to be implemented. It was pretty well known that many of the rabbis had concluded that medical treatment could be provided on the Sabbath – but then perhaps only for life-threatening conditions.⁷ I guess the synagogue leader had surmised that Jasher's bent state was chronic and her life not in immediate peril.

⁷ Sharp "Commentary", and Schifferdecker "Healing" offer brief summaries of the range of views of the various authorities of the time.

But then it was Jesus speaking, and his voice now had a decided edge to it: “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath release your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be released on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”⁸

The “hypocrites” charge stung at first, but was justified as we had all failed until then to recognise that in this act of healing *God* was at work: we were all blind.⁹

But the sting didn’t last long as grins started to appear on many of the faces around me. Here was Rabbi Jesus at work, giving his reasoning for his application of the Sabbath commandment.¹⁰ Each morning our beasts would have to be untied from the manger in the house and taken outside for water; and this was the case regardless of whether we were in the midst of observing Sabbath or not – a point that had been well understood by the rabbis for generations.¹¹ Jesus, superlative rabbi that he was, applied the same logic to Jasher, this woman bound by her affliction, this daughter of Abraham, one in even greater need of release than a humble beast of burden needing to be untied for watering.

This really was what Sabbath was about: worship and freedom, not endless worry, being tied in knots about whether you’ve broken this or that interpretation of the Law without even knowing it.¹² As I think about this, and about Jasher’s release from bondage on the Sabbath, the words of the Commandments set out to Moses come to mind: God said to Israel, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”¹³

⁸ Luke 13:15-16. I have used the word “release/released” in preference to the NIV’s “untie” of the ox/ass and “set free” of the woman because the same Greek root is used in each case.

⁹ Garland, *Luke*, 548

¹⁰ Thiessen, *Jesus*, pp.149-173 offers an extensive analysis of Jesus’ actions on the Sabbath and concludes that the “stories portray Jesus responding to criticisms of his Sabbath actions with *legal* arguments that would have been recognisable and theoretically acceptable to others.” (p.173)

¹¹ Bailey, *Jesus*, pp.30-31

¹² Williams, *Reflections*, 1-2-103.

¹³ Deuteronomy 5:15. See Garland, *Luke*, 549

And I think some too realised – or came later to appreciate – that Jesus had a bigger freeing up in mind too. This daughter of Abraham bound for eighteen years by Satan is an illustration of what is wrong with Israel, which Jesus has come to put right. Healing Jasher is a small victory against Satan in anticipation of the larger victory to come. What Jesus had done for this poor woman was what he longed to do for Israel as a whole. The enemy, Satan, the accuser, had had Israel in his power for many years, and it is only the kingdom message of Jesus that could free her. But Israel persisted in maintaining tight boundaries, including the rigid application of the Sabbath law. Ultimately it was only in Jerusalem, the earthly Zion, that Israel would finally be released from bondage. And when that happened there on the first day of the week there was a whole new cause for a Sabbath celebration to exceed all that had gone before.¹⁴

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Jesus made his reply to the synagogue leader's sneering accusation of us all; and the grins turned into wry chuckling and the chuckling turning into loud rejoicing as we too joined Jasher in giving praise to God, this God who frees us from the things that bind us. I lost sight of the synagogue leader at that point: I suspect he headed out the back door, fuming in humiliation. He could hardly deny the logic of Jesus' interpretation, but he clearly didn't like it. Perhaps he couldn't bear the idea that every single little one of us – Jasher included – is of vital importance to God. If that was the case, then where was the prestige in being the leader?¹⁵ But I also sympathise with him: he certainly hasn't been the last of God's people to have been hide-bound by his tradition and long-established norms, to have failed to grasp the higher values signified by that tradition, and to have missed the heart of what it means to be a new creation in Christ.¹⁶

We tumbled out into the square, continuing to praise God, and explaining to passers-by the reason for our elation.

¹⁴ Wright, *Luke*, 167

¹⁵ Williams, *Reflections*, p.103

¹⁶ Sharp, "Commentary"

Jasher was among us in the square, of course. You may wonder what became of her.¹⁷

I don't know her full history, but I have often heard people of that village tell of how she became a faithful disciple of Jesus. She didn't travel with Jesus on towards Jerusalem; nor was she a witness to the dreadful events that took place there – what I have obliquely referred to in my letter as “the sprinkling of blood”; nor was she among those to meet with the risen Jesus before his ascension. But nevertheless she remained a consistent witness of all that God had done for her in Jesus the Christ. Her experience of release led her to a powerful ministry of interceding for release for others: many were to enjoy newfound freedom from the spirits and emotional wounds and curses that had tied them up in knots because of her kindly, calm, journeying alongside them and through her faithful prayer.

Jasher could easily have kept her experience confined to that Sabbath day and to that synagogue. She was just a humble woman, and seemingly unworthy of being an instrument of the workings of God. But set free as she was, she found freedom to express the goodness and greatness of God out in the world. Experiencing renewal within the gathered company of worshippers on the Sabbath, she felt equipped to be part of the dispersed people of God out into the community for the rest of each week.

The Sabbath command was given on Mount Sinai. It hasn't been taken away, but the requirements of holiness of which it was part have been fully met in Jesus. So now we come to the new Mount Zion, my metaphor for the city of those covenanted to God through Christ Jesus.

As I come now to write my letter to my brother and sister Hebrews dispersed far away from Jerusalem,¹⁸ I am aware that many of them imagine themselves unworthy. They imagine themselves cringing before God, as if we were once again in front of Sinai with its fire and storm, trumpet blast and thundering voice. But I want to see them stepping out with confidence into the light of God's city, where they are known and expected, and where the beloved figure of Jesus is waiting for them.¹⁹

¹⁷ The following is of course entirely speculative insofar as it recounts the life of “Jasher”, of which we have no record beyond Luke 13.

¹⁸ The destination and audience for the letter is widely disputed. See the discussion in Guthrie, *Hebrews*, pp.22-27 and Duling and Perrin, p.284.

¹⁹ Williams, *Reflections*, 103

And because this is our vision of the future, we can make it so in the present also – like Jasher, taking our knowledge and experience of the grace and goodness of God, taking our freedom and hope, into the life of every day, Sunday Sabbath and every day of the week.

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