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Unshakable Faith: Freedom, Sabbath, and the Kingdom That Cannot Be Shaken

Introduction

The Lukan account of Jesus healing the bent woman in the synagogue (Luke 13:10–17) is one of the most theologically charged Sabbath episodes in the Gospel tradition. It is the last recorded instance of Jesus teaching in a synagogue, and it dramatizes both the liberating mission of Jesus and the tension between God’s kingdom and human systems of control. The narrative is not simply about a healing; it is about freedom, identity, and the meaning of Sabbath. Luke links this story to themes of deliverance in Israel’s history and draws attention to the symbolic weight of “eighteen years” of bondage.

Placed alongside Hebrews 12:28–29, which calls the church to worship in gratitude because we are receiving “a kingdom that cannot be shaken,” the text invites a deeper reflection on what it means to live in unshakable faith. The bent woman stands as a living parable of the human condition under bondage, and her straightening becomes a sign of the unshakable kingdom that Christ inaugurates. To explore this theme, we will examine the exegetical details of Luke 13, the theological implications of freedom and Sabbath, and the ecclesial calling of Hebrews 12.

Exegetical Insights

The Spirit of Weakness

Luke describes the woman as having a *pneuma astheneias* (“a spirit of weakness”). This phrase is distinctive. While the noun *astheneia* can mean “sickness” or “weakness,” the addition of *pneuma* suggests a deeper dimension beyond physical ailment. As Joel Green notes, Luke portrays the woman’s condition as bondage, not simply biological malfunction, situating her within the cosmic conflict between God’s reign and oppressive powers.⁽¹⁾ This does not mean every sickness is demonic, but Luke’s construction emphasizes that her condition carried both physical and spiritual weight.

The imagery of posture is crucial. She was *synkyptousa*—bent double, unable to straighten (*anakypsai*). One commentator observes that such a condition not only restricted her movement but denied her the ability to meet others face-to-face, effectively narrowing her world to the



ground beneath her feet.(2) Her bent posture was a metaphor for her constrained existence, unable to lift her gaze toward heaven.

The Significance of Eighteen Years

Luke’s detail that she was bound for eighteen years is not incidental. It recalls Israel’s history: in Judges 3:14 and 10:8, the nation suffered under foreign oppression for eighteen years until God raised a deliverer. The number also resonates symbolically in Jewish tradition, where the numerical value of *chai* (life) is 18. To be bound for eighteen years is to have life itself constricted. Moreover, in a world where lifespans averaged 30–40 years, this condition consumed half her life. Luke intends readers to feel the weight of hopelessness: this woman could never “straighten up” on her own.

The Seeing and the Speaking of Jesus

Verse 12 pivots the narrative: “When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are freed from your sickness.’” The verb *idōn* (“having seen”) in Luke–Acts often carries the sense of perceiving with compassion (cf. Luke 7:13; 19:5). Jesus’ sight initiates action. Sharon Ringe points out that in Luke’s Sabbath stories, the controversy is never whether to honor the Sabbath, but how to honor it—whether Sabbath holiness is found in restriction or in restoration.(3) Jesus embodies the latter: His seeing compels His speaking, His recognition issues in liberation.

Freedom, Not Merely Healing

Significantly, Jesus declares, “You are freed (*apolelytai*) from your sickness.” The verb is in the perfect tense: she has been freed and remains free. Healing addresses a symptom; freedom names a new status. This liberation is holistic: physical (her body straightens), social (she is restored to visibility in the community), and spiritual (Jesus names her a “daughter of Abraham,” reaffirming her covenant identity).

The verb for “straighten up” (*anorthōthē*) is in the passive voice, emphasizing that the action is done to her. She does not heal herself; she is acted upon by divine power. The same verb reappears in Hebrews 12:12: “Therefore, lift (*anorthōsate*) your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees.” The echo suggests that the miracle in her becomes the ministry in the community.

Theological Exploration

Sabbath as Liberation

The healing provokes the synagogue leader’s protest: “There are six days in which work should be done; come then to be healed, and not on the Sabbath” (Luke 13:14). His indignation was not



against healing per se but against its timing. By the first century, Sabbath practice had accumulated detailed regulations in oral tradition—later collected in the Mishnah—designed to guard the commandment by building fences around it. Healing was permitted only if life was immediately threatened.

Jesus responds with a *qal vahomer* (light-to-heavy) argument: if one may untie an ox for water on the Sabbath, how much more should a daughter of Abraham be untied from Satan's bondage? Walter Brueggemann argues that Sabbath is always about freedom—freedom from Pharaoh's production demands, freedom from oppression, freedom to live as God's people.(4) The synagogue leader's protest reveals how religious systems can distort God's liberating intent into restrictive legalism. Jesus reframes Sabbath holiness as the enactment of release.

Healing Versus Freedom

The distinction between being healed and being freed carries theological weight. Leon Morris observes that Luke carefully uses *apolelytai* ("freed") rather than *therapeuō* ("heal"), underscoring that this is not mere medical intervention but eschatological liberation.(5) The woman's posture shifts from bent to straight, from oppressed to restored. Freedom here is not only physical but covenantal—she is re-identified as a true daughter of Abraham.

Posture as Anthropology

The bent woman embodies a distorted anthropology. She is unable to look up, to meet others face-to-face, to direct her gaze heavenward. Her healing is therefore not just about mobility but about restoring her humanity. To stand upright is to reclaim dignity, visibility, and relationship. In patristic thought, humanity's created posture was to be upright, reflecting the image of God by looking upward. Sin bends us downward; salvation raises us again. The narrative thus becomes a microcosm of resurrection.

The Unshakable Kingdom

Hebrews 12:28–29 provides the theological horizon: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." The unshakable kingdom contrasts with the fragility of earthly systems—the woman's bent posture, the synagogue leader's rigid traditions, the oppressive powers at work in the world.

Terry Cross notes that Pentecostal ecclesiology emphasizes participation in the Spirit's kingdom reality, not merely awaiting a future consummation.(6) The church lives now in the tension of the already and not yet, embodying the unshakable kingdom through worship, perseverance, and mutual strengthening. The woman's liberation prefigures the permanence of that kingdom: what God straightens, no power can bend again.

Scholarly Dialogue



Eugene Peterson critiques modern culture's obsession with immediacy. In *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, he insists that true discipleship is not quick fixes but steady perseverance. Yet he also emphasizes that hope does not mean resignation; it means working faithfully while trusting God to act.(7) The bent woman exemplifies this balance—her long obedience in attending synagogue became the place of sudden divine immediacy.

Amos Yong interprets Pentecostal healing narratives as signs of the Spirit's boundary-crossing mission. Rahab in Hebrews 11 and the bent woman in Luke 13 both embody the Spirit's inclusion of marginalized voices and bodies.(8) Their liberation challenges the church to embody hospitality and healing as central practices.

Sharon Ringe highlights that Luke's Sabbath stories are not about abolishing Sabbath but about recovering its true meaning as liberation.(9) This resonates with Brueggemann's reading of Sabbath as resistance against oppressive systems. Together, these voices underscore that unshakable faith is not about maintaining order but about participating in God's liberating disruption.

Practical Reflection

The narrative of the bent woman and the exhortation of Hebrews 12 yield three practical insights for the church:

1. Faith sees dignity where society sees only weakness. The woman is unnamed, yet Jesus calls her "daughter of Abraham." Unshakable faith restores identity to the marginalized.
2. Faith perseveres in tension. Eighteen years of suffering are not wasted. Long obedience prepares the ground for divine immediacy. The church must hold both patience and expectation.
3. Faith straightens communally. What Jesus did for one, Hebrews calls the church to do for all: lift drooping hands, strengthen weak knees, and help one another stand. The miracle becomes ministry.

Conclusion

Unshakable faith is not naïve optimism but trust in the God who sees the bent and restores them to upright posture. Luke 13 presents Jesus as the liberator who redefines Sabbath as freedom, while Hebrews 12 calls the church to embody that freedom as a community grounded in an unshakable kingdom. The bent woman's story is not only about her—it is about us. Her posture is humanity's posture under bondage; her straightening is the church's vocation to live as signs of the kingdom that cannot be shaken.



Bibliography

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