

Broken For Good: The picture of brokenness

Did you know that when a begonia is in its first year of life in a nursery setting that it goes through a dormant season? This is a time of year when its leaves become a liability and so it is “pruned back” until it looks nothing like you would think it should. It very well may resemble a bad haircut that kids sometimes give themselves when an adult is not looking. (pictures)

This happens in the nursery but isn't it interesting that it happens in a nursery? That name evokes the notion of cradling, nurturing, and tender care. A nursery is not necessarily a place where you expect to hear words like pruning, cutting and hacking off appendages.

In the nursery of life where you and I grow up there will be an amazing amount of pruning that will go on within the nurturing process of our lives. What we must come to understand is that for our development as disciples of Jesus Christ, what may feel like a loss or a cutting back is only an exercise that will make us stronger and better than before. There are times when it may feel like a chain saw massacre movie but in reality it is a part of the maturing process of our lives.

There are some things we need to know about it to be able to truly mature like God intends. God uses brokenness to allow us to grow in Him. Brokenness is everywhere in scripture. I made a list of Bible characters who experienced brokenness and it just goes on and on with men and women of faith who were challenged at their very core.

Psalm 51:16-17 says, *“You do not desire a sacrifice, or I would offer one. You do not want a burnt offering.”*¹⁷ *The sacrifice you desire is a broken spirit. You will not reject a broken and repentant heart, O God.* (NLT)

God has always been very specific when it comes to sacrifices we make to Him. It's not just about being sincere. If you don't believe that, check the story of Cain and Abel the sons of Adam and Eve. God is very picky about His sacrifices.

Listen to the writer of Romans 12:1, *“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him.* (NLT)

Brokenness is those times in our lives when we say yes to God and His ways instead of insisting on our own ways. The metaphor we kicked off this series with is found in the story of a horse being broken to ride. It is a life changing moment. Have you ever had that moment? Are you in need of that moment in your life where you will go God's way no matter the cost?

God has always wanted to have broken hearts and a broken and contrite spirit before Him. And then there are the words of Jesus when He challenged the crowd of people who were flocking around Him:

Then He said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be My follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross daily, and follow Me.”²⁴ If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for My sake, you will save it.²⁵ And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? Luke 9:23-25 NLT

As we talk about this today try to remember that God’s ways are not our ways. We should not be totally surprised that God’s way of helping to develop our character would involve being broken and that it requires the taming or breaking of our soul.

So today I want to look at four aspects of brokenness.

1. The goal of brokenness

When Jesus’ earthly ministry started to take off someone asked John the Baptist if he was bothered by it. His answer quotable; he said, “*A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven . . . He must increase, but I must decrease.*” John 3:27-30

This whole process of brokenness is to realize that without Him we can do nothing that has eternal value. The goal is total reliability on Jesus. Of course to achieve this one must live fully for Him. You can’t serve two masters. You can’t be one thing at church and then something totally different outside of church.

The breaking process is not humility or repentance but usually results in both. Humility is when we view our life as a gift from God. The breaking process convicts us if we are stubborn or insensitive toward God. Repentance is genuine sorrow that leads to a change in behavior.

Brokenness calls our attention to our emptiness and weakness and that can only be fixed by the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Brokenness will many times point out an area that we have refused to surrender to God and we are given the choice at that point to follow or fail.

Brokenness is emptying ourselves of selfish ambition so that we are willing and able to be filled with God’s Holy Spirit. When God is trying to tame or break our souls it is to expand our usability in His Kingdom. It is to draw us to accepting His Lordship in our lives.

Remember this; brokenness is not always about suffering! There is such a thing as voluntarily being broken before God. I know that you can also suffer and not be broken which is counterproductive to the process of discipleship.

2. The gift of brokenness

Think with me about brokenness in another term. It could be called, “heart allegiance.” Several Biblical characters come to mind when I think about heart allegiance. Studying the lives of men like Joseph, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego cause us to realize that although deep in brokenness and situations that were dire, their hearts were pledged to God and God alone.

Being pruned is a gift for us since Jesus used the analogy of being branches connected to the Vine. When you cut back a fruit tree it will give better fruit. The gift of brokenness can be found in the pruning process in our lives. Sometimes it is circumstantial and sometimes it involves people, or places or things that are removed from us. It is in those times that I have often reminded people to practice the principle of being made bitter or better.

Crucified living and total surrender also should be included in the positive aspects of being broken.

Let me give you some thoughts about the gift of brokenness. It is the act of personal surrender. Soldiers know this action well. When you surrender you place both hands in the air. You drop everything. It is an act of humility and repentance.

There is also a difference between giving up and surrendering. Alan Nelson does a great job explaining the difference. “Something inside of us despises the thought of surrendering, of quitting. Ah, but surrendering and quitting are two different concepts. Quitting says, “I don’t care.” Surrendering says, “I care.” Quitting says, “I can’t.” Surrendering says, “I can’t. God can.” Quitting is often repressed or expressed anger. Surrendering is expressed love.” He goes on to write these words. “The mate who quits files for divorce. The spouse who says I surrender seeks counseling and accountability. The person who quits becomes an agnostic or atheist, and leaves the church.”

Surrendering and letting go says simply but profoundly, “I depend on you God.”

3. A guide to brokenness

I won’t spend a lot of time here but I want to at least put these thoughts out there. Brokenness can come in lots of ways. Here are just a few for you to think about.

a. Brokenness often occurs during a close encounter with God

There is a great story in the Old Testament about Jacob wrestling with God or the angel of the Lord. They wrestled all night long and for the rest of his life Jacob was broken by a touch from God but also blessed at the same time. When we really get close to God we will see brokenness quite differently than we do when we are far from Him.

Isaiah in Isaiah 6 is another example of one who encountered God in a close way and he fell on his face. Moses did the same thing when he encountered God in a burning bush.

b. Brokenness often occurs when someone voluntarily and passionately seeks God

Historically and Biblically there is a trail of men and women who on their own have sought God with unusual hunger and brokenness. These folks have been responsible for great moves of God on nations, churches and communities but it comes at a price. Brokenness in this context may

look like self-denial, fasting, and praying more than you can ever imagine yourself having the time to do. It is praying, “Whatever it takes Lord, that’s what I’ll be willing to do.”

c. Brokenness often emerges after moral failure

Often when someone crosses a moral line in the Biblical stories we read of the sin, the turmoil, the conviction and guilt followed by repentance and restoration. The breaking process happens somewhere during the turmoil which is brought on by feelings of guilt and or conviction by the Holy Spirit. Time after time in the Bible sin followed by brokenness results in a spiritual homecoming and the person finds themselves experiencing a much deeper walk with our Heavenly Father. It is rooted in remorse, (Godly sorrow) repentance and the faith to see God’s restoring love for His children. It’s turning, trusting and transforming.

d. Brokenness can occur when there are circumstances threatening to defeat us

Brokenness can happen quickly and unexpectedly but it can also be a very long drawn out process. A broken relationship, cancer, a heart attack, financial setback, the death of a loved one all can produce soft hearts.

There is something else that I think can promote brokenness and that is what some have called the plateau syndrome. Gradually and eventually deeply we come to realize that we do not have what it takes to fulfill our dreams. When this happens we realize the lack of control we have over our lives. Our lack of control reveals our deep need for God and can result in our submitting to His Lordship.

e. Brokenness might be promoted by a fervent love for God

While I can identify with several of these I think I like this one best. When we maintain our love for God and keep Him on the throne of our hearts we will be willing to go through or endure incredible things for God. How easy it is to remove God from the throne of our hearts and replace Him with someone else. It may be a spouse, a mother or father, a friend, a hobby, an addiction, a habit, or any number of things. I would plead with you today to look inside and don’t let anything or anyone come between your soul and the Savior.

Nothing between my soul and the Savior,
Naught of this world’s delusive dream;
I have renounced all sinful pleasure;
Jesus is mine, there’s nothing between.

Nothing between, like worldly pleasure;
Habits of life, though harmless they seem,
Must not my heart from Him e’er sever;
He is my all, there’s nothing between.

Nothing between, like pride or station;
Self-life or friends shall not intervene;
Though it may cost me much tribulation,
I am resolved; there's nothing between.

Nothing between my soul and the Savior,
So that His blessed face may be seen;
Nothing preventing the least of His favor,
Keep the way clear! Let nothing between.

4. The grace of brokenness

There is something that happens the older you get and that is you start to lose your flexibility. This can involve your muscles but generally it involves everything. You like routine. You don't want change. You begin to struggle with learning new things and so then you become bitter and start saying derogatory things toward those coming behind you generationally. This of course doesn't have to be but sadly too often it is the case.

Jesus had a lot of disdain for those people He encountered that were inflexible. Older people often break their bones because they are brittle. You may not be able to do anything about that but remaining broken before God in spirit is about the grace of God in you.

Henri Nouwen, the widely read Christian author, was a professor at Yale University Divinity School and later at Harvard. He had a prestigious life filled with honor. But in 1986 he resigned from his job of teaching to become pastor for the Daybreak community of people with disabilities in Toronto, Canada.

He was welcomed into one of the homes and lived with the men and women with disabilities. One of Nouwen's tasks was to help Adam Arnett, a severely disabled man, with his morning routine. In Henri's book "Adam, God's Beloved", written shortly before he died, he describes how Adam became his friend, his teacher, and his guide.

Just a year after arriving in Daybreak, Henri suffered a severe depression. Nouwen wrote: "I had been received with open arms, given all the attention and affection I could ever hope for, and offered a safe and loving place to grow spiritually as well as emotionally. Everything seemed ideal. But precisely at that time, I fell apart – as if I needed a safe place to hit bottom." Prior to that time his surroundings had been too ordered, too pleasant, perhaps even too superficial. But the Daybreak community was a safe, "real" place. A safe place to discover the brokenness that had been there all along.

Larry Crabb writes, "A central task of community is to create a place that is safe enough for the walls to be torn down, safe enough for each of us to reveal our brokenness"

Let me give you look at the positive side of brokenness. Dr. Albert Schweitzer had earned doctorates in science, medicine, music, theology and philosophy besides dozens of honorary degrees from leading universities around the world. At his Lambarene, African hospital site, an expansion project called for heavy, tiring manual labor. Seeing a man of the country reading a book, Schweitzer asked him to help with the work. Offended at the suggestion the man replied, "Oh no, Since I have become an intellectual, I no longer do manual labor." At this Dr. Schweitzer observed, "I tried to be an intellectual, but I didn't make it," whereupon Schweitzer picked up some heavy timbers and went on with his work.

Albert Schweitzer lived a broken life. He could have had a life of ease but he answered the call of Jesus and he answered it in an incredible way. You need to study his story. I don't have time to tell it to you but in his choice to live a life away from the life of ease his family heritage would have provided, chose Africa and he chose to live with a people to meet their spiritual and medical needs. From 1912 until his death on the mission/hospital station at the age of 90 in 1965. He sacrificed his life.

Here are his own words. "Oh, this 'noble' culture of ours! It speaks so piously of human dignity and human rights and then disregards this dignity and these rights of countless millions and treads them underfoot, only because they live overseas or because their skins are of different color or because they cannot help themselves.

"If all this oppression and all this sin and shame are perpetrated under the eye of the German God, or the American God, or the British God, and if our states do not feel obliged first to lay aside their claim to be 'Christian'—then the name of Jesus is blasphemed and made a mockery. And the Christianity of our states is blasphemed and made a mockery before those poor people. The name of Jesus has become a curse, and our Christianity—yours and mine—has become a falsehood and a disgrace . . . For every person who committed an atrocity in Jesus' name, someone must step in to help in Jesus' name; for every person who robbed, someone must bring a replacement; for everyone who cursed, someone must bless.

Brokenness will call you out of yourself. Brokenness will call you to a level of discipleship almost unheard of in the American and western hemisphere churches. Our self-sufficient culture is one of our biggest barriers to reaching our potential. We are steeped in the idea that if we work harder and learn more we can achieve whatever we desire. It's the American dream right?

Roberta Hestenes writes, "in our day which emphasizes self-confidence, self-assertion and self-fulfillment, we need to learn again the lessons of brokenness – of humility and gentleness before God and each other. . . this brokenness point toward a deeper reality, the response to the prompting of the Spirit in certain circumstances of need, demand or spiritual yearning and hunger. Brokenness is a yielded heart open before God, a heart emptied of pride and self-claims, of all arrogance, acknowledging sin, frailty, weakness and inadequacy.

We discover ourselves again to be hungry and thirsty, poor and needy, when we thought ourselves full and needing nothing."

I wish I could share this as deeply as I feel it. I fear that these are just mere words that will float over your heads and make little difference but I'll leave that to God and His Holy Spirit.

I want to invite you to pray. Let's bow our heads and be silent for a few moments.

Take a good look at the brokenness you feel the strongest and see if God is in it.

1. Have you allowed it to draw you closer to God or drive you away?
2. Focus all your energy and strength on being as close to God as possible and let Him fill you with His presence as you surrender everything and everybody to Him.