

Adventuring with God

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Bruised Reeds

Spring is a delightful time, no matter how early or late it comes. Sitting on our back deck in the mornings, I can watch a whole new world opening up around me as shrubs and flowers burst forth with dazzling colors and delightful fragrances. Another joy of springtime is the return of the birds. After a long winter, I'm always happy to both see and hear the many varieties of birds that are merrily preparing nests and finding new sources of food.

There's only one thing casting a cloud over our spring this year. Our young redbud tree, the largest tree in our backyard, is still struggling—a victim of the severe drought we had a couple of years ago. It hasn't gained its strength back, and one whole branch and side is now dead. It's a strange sight, seeing part of the tree so healthy, with colorful blooms and new leaf growth, and another part totally bare. It's sad to see it in such a crippled condition, especially since we've tried everything we can think of to help it recover.

When it first began to struggle we had high hopes that it would be a temporary problem. Now it's obvious that there won't be any quick fixes. As it continues to decline, my husband and I have discussed our options. Would it be better to just cut it down and plant another tree in its place? If it continues its downhill slide we'll have to do that, so why not get it over with? When we've talked about that possibility, I admit I get uncomfortable. It just seems *wrong* to take anything that still has life (even if it's diminished) and cut it short. Besides, we can't see into the future. At some point it may begin

to thrive and then it would be awful if in our impatience we never gave it that chance.

The interesting thing about all this is that the birds haven't seemed to notice redbud's dead limb and deteriorating condition. They continue to build their nests in its healthy branches and seek out its shady sanctuary, just like they've always done. The finches seem especially pleased with it. While Tony and I are bothered by the tree's appearance, it seems that those who need what it offers (the birds, i.e.) are not. Even in its crippled condition, it's still useful to them.

In Isaiah 42:1-4 we find a prophecy about the coming Messiah. **"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth."** Matthew quotes from this prophecy in his description of Jesus in Matthew 12:18-21.

This passage provides a great contrast between Jesus and other aspiring leaders. His attitudes and methods couldn't be more opposite than theirs. While people of the world build their kingdoms, empires, and businesses through human strength, ingenuity, and self-promotion, Jesus quietly went about to achieve His goals without any regard to the strength of His disciples or the attention of the

masses. He didn't grow discouraged by the slow progress or the seemingly impossible odds of accomplishing them. At one point He lost almost all of His followers through one of His teachings (see John 6:66-68), and in the end everyone deserted Him, even His closest disciples.

How could He be so faithful in the midst of so much turmoil and opposition? How could He finish His course when there were so few helpers—and those He had were so weak and ineffective? We find the answer in the first verse of Isaiah's prophecy: **"I will put my Spirit on him."** The power of the Holy Spirit made the difference—both in Him and later on, in His disciples.

That's why Jesus can still use bruised reeds and smoldering wicks. Even in their brokenness and weakness, they have a resource that the world knows nothing about: the very life of God that can bless and transform others, even when it flows out of seemingly ineffective vessels. As Jesus told His disciples when the crowds abandoned Him, **"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing"** (John 6:62). He continues to work with us and commit His kingdom's work to us even when we mess up and feel keenly our own inadequacies. Sometimes we wonder why He lets us continue to take up space when He could plant in our place someone else far stronger, more attractive, and more spiritually useful to Him.

Such thoughts never enter His mind because they are based on human methods and attitudes towards

success. The human gifts, strengths, and abilities that look so wonderful to men (if they operate independently from the Holy Spirit) are actually a *hindrance* to establishing His kingdom. D.L. Moody, the great evangelist, once commented, "The fact is, we have *too much* strength. We are not weak enough. It is not our strength that we want. One drop of God's strength is worth more than all the world." Old Testament prophets knew and wrote about this principle: **"Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts"** (Zechariah 4:6).

The Lord Jesus can be merciful to bruised reeds and smoldering wicks because they are His vessels through which He can touch and bless the world. As long as they have the Holy Spirit residing in them, they can be useful and effective even in their weakness.

So take heart and be encouraged today! Your spiritual significance has more to do with Him than it does with you. Open your arms wide and let others build their nests in your branches. Provide shelter for them, even if (like our redbud tree) you are "crippled" in the world's eyes by the misfortunes and storms you've experienced. As you allow the Holy Spirit of God to anoint you and use you to bless others, you in turn will be blessed and find significance. This is the unique principle of God's kingdom that sets it apart from every worldly kingdom and gives hope to every bruised reed and smoldering wick. **"This was the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes"** (Psalm 118:23).

"The great feature of the new covenant, in its superiority to the old, is that whereas in the law all was external, in the new, the kingdom of God would be within. A new spirit is put within us, God's own Spirit is given to dwell within our spirit, and so the heart and the inner life are fitted to be the temple and home of God.

Just when we see that there is nothing in us to admire or rest in, God sees in us everything to admire and to rest in, because there is room for himself. The lowly one is the home of the Holy One.

Happy is the soul who is willing to learn the lesson early that we will always have the simultaneous experience of weakness and power, of emptiness and filling, of deep humiliation as well as the most wonderful indwelling of the Holy One."

Andrew Murray,
in *The Path to Holiness*