He Will Not Break a Bruised Reed

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"Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles.

“He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

“He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law” (Isaiah 42:1–4).

This passage is all about Jesus. The Holy Spirit had moved upon the prophet Isaiah to bring forth a revelation of what Christ would be like when he comes. And Isaiah’s opening word here, “Behold,” signals to his listeners: “Prepare for a new revelation about the Messiah.”

The image that comes into focus from these four verses is clear: Christ wasn’t coming to force people to hear him. He wouldn’t come with a loud clamor or noise. He would come as a tender, loving Savior.

We find the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Matthew 12. The Pharisees had just held a council to plan how they might kill Jesus, all because he had healed a man with a withered hand on the sabbath. Matthew tells us that “when Jesus knew [discovered] it, he withdrew” (12:15).

Christ didn’t retaliate in anger. We don’t see him railing against those who plotted his death. He wasn’t like the disciples, who wanted to call down fire on his opponents, even though Christ could have done that. He could have summoned a legion of angels to deal with his enemies. But Jesus wasn’t out to take revenge.

It was this tender spirit, Matthew says, that reveals the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: “He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets” (Matthew 12:19).

Isaiah was saying, in essence, “The Savior isn’t coming to force anybody into his kingdom. He’s not coming as a loud, boisterous, overpowering personality. No, you’ll hear him speak with a still, small voice in your inner man.”

So, what did Jesus do after he quietly withdrew from Jerusalem? Matthew says he immediately went outside the city and continued to heal all who crowded in on him: “Great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all” (12:15).

As we search through the gospel accounts, we’re struck by the number of times Jesus performed miracles but instructed the people, “Do not tell anyone about this. Don’t let this news be spread abroad.” After healing two blind men, Christ told the men to keep the miracle to themselves: “Jesus straitly charged them, saying, See that no man know it” (9:30). After he fed a crowd of 5,000 and the people tried to force him to be king, “He departed again into a mountain himself alone” (John 6:14–15).

You see, Jesus didn’t want the people following him for his miracles. He wanted their devotion because his tender words had captured their hearts. He wanted all of humankind, including every future generation, to know he came into the world not as a judge, but as a Savior: “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17).

Consider Jesus’ tenderness in two areas: toward America and a sinful world, and toward his own people.

I hear a question being asked by many believers today: “Why hasn’t God turned America over to judgment? Why hasn’t he dealt with us according to our sins? He gave Noah’s generation 120 years of warnings, but after that he said, ‘Enough,’ and brought a flood. God has suffered America’s sins for a long time now, so why haven’t we seen his righteous judgment on us?”

I love this country, and I for one don’t want to see God’s final judgment come upon America. I would so much
rather enjoy the longsuffering of the Lord. I don’t want to see tears in the eyes of my children and grandchildren over what is coming upon a society like ours. Yet, like many Christians, I am completely amazed at why God’s judgment has been delayed.

I do believe we are seeing the beginnings of judgment. I see the terrible calamities taking place in the world as warnings. Yet, because America’s economy hasn’t collapsed, and our nation is still able to function as it has, we seem to stumble along from crisis to crisis, given chance after chance.

I’m convinced there is only one answer to this perplexity: it’s all because of the tenderness and longsuffering of our Savior. We find the proof in Isaiah’s prophecy: “A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench” (Isaiah 42:3). America has become a nation of bruised reeds!

A reed is a tall stalk or plant with a hollow stem, usually found in marshy areas or near a supply of water. It’s a tender plant, so it bends easily when high winds or swift waters strike. Yet the reed can only bend so far before it finally breaks and is carried away with the flood.

Like a reed in calm weather, America once stood proud and tall, full of purpose and promise. Our entire society honored God, and the Bible was held up as the standard for our laws and judicial system. Even during my lifetime, school textbooks consisted of lessons and stories from the Bible. Jesus was acknowledged as the Son of God, the One who gives our country favor and untold blessings.

Yet, in our prosperity, we became like ancient Israel: proud and unthankful. And we’ve fallen a long way in a short time. God has been pushed out of our court systems, out of our schools, his name mocked and ridiculed. In New York City, a teacher can place a copy of the Koran or even a *Playboy* magazine on his desk, but if he brings a Bible to class, he could lose his job.

Our society has totally lost its moral compass. As a result, the America that once stood tall is now crippled, like a bruised reed.

Even the hardest, most ungodly American today knows this country is growing more corrupt by the hour. Everyone knows we’re living on borrowed time. How long can an empire last when it kills off its unborn…where fathers rape their daughters, mothers molest their sons, and child molestation has become a national disgrace…where policemen commit suicide because of fear and despair (which eight officers did recently in New York City alone)…where so many teenagers have become barbarians…where all that reflects God and Christ is not only ignored but cruelly mocked? How long can the violence, the murder, the molestations continue?

If we got what we deserved, America should be lying in ruins, devastated by anarchy. But Isaiah says our tender Jesus would not break a bruised reed. And even as America sits in utter confusion, bent over and bruised by our many sins, we are not yet broken. In his tenderness, our Lord has not let that happen. Jesus himself was born into a bruised society.

When Christ came to earth, Israel was living under the crushing rule of Rome. The Jews were heavily burdened by Roman taxes and laws. Meanwhile, a greedy priesthood was taking advantage of widows and the poor. The downtrodden were mocked and ridiculed, and the people were blinded by corruption. All of this is why so many of the prophets said Christ would come in an hour of darkness, bringing great light.

Jesus came into a society plagued by hypocrisy and rampant with sin. As he beheld the nation’s condition, he wept over Jerusalem, prophesying that its house would become desolate. Yet he gave that society seventy more years of gospel preaching. And those years would be filled with Spirit-anointed witnesses on the streets, performing miracles, preaching hope and repentance, and issuing a powerful call to the kingdom. Jesus simply would not break the bruised reed that Israel had become.

Right now, that is a picture of America: a society completely bruised in its morality. We’re also a nation that is depressed and disturbed, with people living in fear and mental agony. There are more psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and counselors than ever in history, yet they can’t keep up with all the people begging for just a single hour of help. This is true even in the church: Christian counseling teams across the land are overburdened by the press of people needing help for their problems.

Our children are being bruised by broken families, abuse and molestation. Teenagers are being bruised by
immorality, materialism and numbness. Satan has unleashed a flood of evil upon the land, and it has left in its wake a bent and bruised people.

Much of the church itself has this same bruised spirit. In letter after letter, I read of Christians drying up in megachurches where there is no longer preaching of sin or righteousness. They’re bewildered, wondering, “Where can I find true worship? There’s no sense of Christ’s presence here. There’s no brokenness.” Pastors also write, confessing, “Brother Dave, I’m backslidden.”

The *New York Times* ran a story recently about a Pentecostal church of 10,000 whose message is, “We’re here to make you happy.” But that message is bringing false hope and only temporary relief.

“The smoking flax shall he not quench” (Isaiah 42:3). Somewhere in this nation, God sees wicks that are smoldering. These wicks once were on fire, aflame with fervor for his purposes and concerns. But now they’re barely smoking.

Could it be that as God looks on America, he sees just a little spark of devotion left?

Is there still a people who remember the Lord and are willing to take a stand for his name? Does there yet remain a small remnant who will fight to rekindle the flame of God’s righteousness?

The Lord has said, “If I see a wick that’s smoldering, I won’t snuff it out. The flame may be gone, with no appearance of fire, but if I still see embers burning, I will not allow it to go out. As long as I hear even a faint cry from faithful servants somewhere, I will not allow that bruised reed to break.”

God has not yet given up on us. But the fact is, we are living on tender-mercy time. I see this everywhere I travel, especially in Europe. That continent is far more secular than the United States, a land that by its own choice has become absolutely godless. As you walk through the streets in some countries, you sense a spirit of antichrist, an arrogance against God.

Sweden is now one of the most affluent European nations, and the richer it grows the more apostate it becomes. At the same time, the evangelical church there is in danger of growing apathetic in its walk with Christ. Ireland, a nation that for decades suffered crushing poverty, is now becoming more prosperous. Yet the spiritual climate there is also one of apathy, with secularism creeping in.

The whole attitude in Europe seems to be, “So what if judgment comes? Let’s live it up, eat, drink and be merry.” There is no sense of urgency, no need of God.

I believe the Lord is speaking a clear message to the whole world right now. He has the power to stop any potential terrorist attack at any time. He could merely speak a word, and angels would bring down every evil power. Instead, he has chosen to send or permit international calamities, and all are signs that we are on his tender mercy time. Consider the Lord’s tenderness toward his own people.

We have seen what Jesus did when he went outside Jerusalem: “Great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all” (Matthew 12:15). In this brief verse, we see the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “A bruised reed shall he not break” (Isaiah 42:3).

The word “bruised” has a number of definitions. It means hurt, pounded to pieces, having injured feelings, crushed by unfulfilled expectations. In my spirit, I sense that many of God’s people today need a word about our Savior’s tender mercies, because they themselves have become bruised reeds.

Every week, sincere, devoted Christians go to church to raise their voices and hands in worship to the Lord. Yet many of these same people have been bruised deeply and are close to a breaking point. The fire in their hearts has ebbed so low that all they can see left in their lives is a tiny bit of smoke.

One dedicated couple who recently returned from the mission field wrote to me of how bruised they’ve been. Years before, they had left everything they owned to spend seven years overseas, ministering and giving their all. When they returned, they came home with nothing, having left all their substance in the land to which they were called.

Now, as they began looking for jobs, every door before them was shut. Both the husband and wife were well
educated, with a great supply of skills. Whenever they put in applications for a position, theirs always rose to the top. But these talented people were rejected in every place, always ending up as second or third choice.

Finally, a Christian company asked the husband to interview for a job, one he was well qualified for. The company spent a full day courting him, and they all but assured him the position was his. But once again, the job went to another person.

That couple is deeply bruised now in heart and spirit. They’ve been left wondering, “We gave our lives faithfully on the mission field. There is nothing in our walk that would cause a controversy with God. We have prayed and believed. So, why are we at this point?”

If you want to see a biblical example of someone who was bruised deeply in body and spirit, consider the prophet Elijah. This man was brought to an absolute breaking point.

Elijah knew God and heard his voice as few people did. His prayers opened and shut heaven. He had such spiritual authority that he fearlessly confronted 400 idolatrous priests of Baal and slew them all single-handedly. He was so full of God’s Spirit that he outran a chariot over a stretch of twenty miles.

Yet, after all these feats, Elijah received word that wicked Queen Jezebel was on his trail to kill him. Fear came over the mighty prophet, and the next time we see him he’s sitting exhausted under a juniper tree, weary and discouraged.

God’s mighty servant had been mentally and physically bruised. Elijah must have thought, “Why is this happening to me? God’s hand has been on my life for all these years, and I’ve seen him perform miracle after miracle. But now I’m facing a hopeless situation, and it’s testing me beyond all my human capacity.”

This same man, who once stood against the powers of hell and called down God’s fire, now cried out in distress: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah broke down, crying, “Lord, I can’t take any more.”

Some are even now under Elijah’s juniper tree, too tired to pray.

Maybe you’re at this place of bruising, an absolute breaking point. You have lived as a faithful servant, you have prayed diligently, and you have known God’s voice. You have won victories in the past, and you deeply love the Lord. But now you’re bruised deeply, wounded as never before, and you can’t even bring yourself to pray.

You think, “I have sought God faithfully, I’ve pored over his Word, I’ve prayed diligently. Yet this trial has come out of nowhere, and my soul has been bent further than anything I’ve ever known.” Now all your tears have dried up. You look and feel worn out, discouraged, rejected and alone. Like Elijah, you’re bowed down under a juniper tree, discouraged and distressed, holding on for dear life.

Beloved, this Christian walk is warfare. It means battles, weariness, wounds, and a ferocious enemy who’s out to destroy you. When you’re down and bruised as Elijah was, you become drowsy and sleepy. And that’s exactly when you’re most vulnerable to condemning thoughts. Your tender conscience tells you:

“You’re not praying the way you did before. You don’t study the Word enough. You’re dried up and lukewarm, your fire is going out, and you’re simply not a good testimony. Now you’ve allowed Satan to rob you of the peace God gave you. You just don’t have what it takes. Your fleshly nature is unchangeable after all.”

After this, the Word of God will try you. This is just what happened with Joseph: we’re told that until his appointed time came, the Word of the Lord tried him. And it was happening now with Elijah as well. Likewise, when we come to our own place of being bruised, our absolute breaking point, it will happen with us too. Our conscience will beat us up with the Word we’ve hidden in our hearts.

Think about it. Throughout Scripture we read, “Be not slothful. Pray fervently and earnestly, with all that is in you, seeking him while he may be found. Give yourself to prayer and the Word. Redeem the time. Beware of the foolish virgins’ slothfulness. God says his people have forgotten him for days on end.”

All of these passages and principles come rushing to our minds in our time of bruising. And we think, “I’ve let my Lord down. I have not obeyed his Word.” Your wavering faith is the wick that’s smoldering, and the devil is eager
to see it snuffed out.

Like Elijah, you’re so worn out and discouraged, all you want to do is sleep. Scripture says that’s just what this godly man did: “He lay and slept” (1 Kings 19:5). He simply couldn’t carry the burden anymore.

But the Lord didn’t rebuke Elijah for this. God knew his servant had come to a breaking point. I picture our precious Father saying of him, “Look at this faithful man, bruised and hurting. He has reached the end of his rope, unable to explain his pain to anyone. I have promised him, ‘I will not break a bruised reed.’”

So, what happened? “The angel of the Lord came… and touched (Elijah), and said, Arise and eat; because the journey is too great for thee” (19:7).

Here is an incredible word for every bruised reed who’s reading this message. It doesn’t matter how bruised you are, how bent down by your flood of testing. God has made you a promise: “You will not be broken. I won’t allow your flame to go out. Your faith will not be quenched.”

Dear saint, this message is to you from heaven. You are being touched with a word that calls to you: “Rise up now. God isn’t mad at you. And he’s not going to let you go down. He knows this situation is too great for you to handle. He will supply you with supernatural strength. He’s going to give you what you need to move on.”

Over forty days and nights, Elijah was slowly restored. Day by day, he still plodded along, with only enough strength for each day. Finally, the time came when the Lord said, “What are you doing hiding in this cave, Elijah? I can’t let you settle into this kind of despair and see it take over your life. I have restored you with my loving patience. And now I’m going to give you direction.”

What word do you need to hear to bring you out of your cave?

Do you expect to hear a harsh, backbreaking word in the midst of your bruised condition? Scripture says that during Elijah’s time in the cave, “A great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind” (1 Kings 19:11). God was not in that message.

Do you expect your soul to be shaken by a loud wake-up call? “After the wind [was] an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake” (19:11). Do you expect to hear a fiery word? “And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire” (19:12).

God knows just the kind of word you need to hear when you’re bruised. And it’s not a word of judgment, not a hard word, not a red-hot sermon. I believe the Lord is telling us in this passage, “When you are bent down by your trials, I will not treat you harshly.” No, Elijah needed to hear a soft, kind voice: “After the fire [came] a still small voice” (19:12). Some manuscripts translate this phrase as “a gentle blowing,” meaning, “a soft, refreshing breeze.”

This same gentle, still, small voice comes to us from the heart of the Father today. And its message is the same: “Ye have seen the end [outcome] of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (James 5:11).

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him…. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him” (Psalm 103:8–11, 13).

Here is your word of deliverance: Rise up and trust! The time has come for you to believe Jesus is with you in your storm. He will give you the strength to endure it.

Don’t believe the lie that you’re going to be crushed. The devil will not have the upper hand. The Lord has said, “No matter how bruised you feel, I will not allow you to be broken. I won’t let the fire go out. My Spirit is going to blow on the embers, and your flame for me will come back again.”

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