

Being Whole

RENEWAL THROUGH BROKENNESS



LARRY DEASON

Loving Relationships That Last Series

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Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from *The New International Version*.

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*“He does not crush the weak
or quench the smallest hope...”*

To the *wife of my youth* Helen,
Affectionately known to me as “Muffie,”
Who, through the years, has stood by my side
and has been
The wind beneath my wings.

IN LOVING MEMORY
of
Mother
(1913-1990)

beautifully adorned flower
whose last ten years were darkened and broken
by Alzheimer's Disease
but
who now has come to know and experience
ultimate wholeness
in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Being Whole

Renewal Through Brokenness

Mark Twain once remarked that, as a boy, he had considered his father somewhat foolish, although he was amazed at how much wiser the old man grew as the years went by. One suspects that it was the younger man's perception, not his father's prudence, which had most changed with the passing of time. Students of Scripture can especially identify with Twain's observation; numerous biblical passages that once seemed trivial or even nonsensical tend to become profoundly meaningful in one's later life. The concept of broken off flowers and blown out candles is a biblical gem that had eluded my grasp for many years, although it had always been within my reach. May the reader now patiently consider an extended passage from Matthew's gospel account, on the premise that good things are indeed worth waiting for:

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were

hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath"...Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised

reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.”¹

The Pharisees had somehow become more concerned with religious technicalities than with human beings. Their system of values had become so twisted that they practiced a higher regard for animals than for people. In their preoccupation with religion, they lost sight of both God and man. It is no wonder they failed to recognize the God-Man as their Messiah. The spiritual dilemma of many people today, including some who claim to be Christians, is parallel in many respects to that of these Pharisees: They abound in religion, but they do not know God; consequently, they do not know the value of a person.

I used to care nothing for things of beauty; often, I would destroy them, just for something to do. It is easy to be thoughtless and cruel. For example, one might be walking along a path and happen to notice one flower with a bent stem. Perhaps a bird had landed upon it and the stem had given way under the weight. But careless people do not concern themselves with the causes and backgrounds of brokenness, and so they snap off the delicate blossom, and toss it aside.

When a candle wick burns down and begins to flicker and smoulder, even though it is yet able to give a little light, we almost instinctively blow it out. After all, it is no longer what it once was. It has become less than it was meant to be.

The usual response toward anything that blemishes our cosmetic-crazed culture illustrates my point: If something is flawed, bruised, bent, warped, cracked, split, broken, or shattered, what do we do with it? What usually happens to the marred, the scarred, the barely aflame, barely alive in our culture? We set these defective commodities aside, stamp “Reject” on them, and eventually discard or destroy them. Consider the yearly post-Christmas purge that fills the garbage heaps and trash cans of America: monuments to our unfriendly disposition toward the broken off flowers and the blown out candles.

The Challenge

The real problem in our consumer-oriented, assembly line society is that, in this habitual disregard of things, it is too easy for us to treat people as disposable objects. We find ourselves forgetting the inherent value and potential beauty of each individual bearer of God’s image. We hear ourselves doubting and flagrantly denying that some of these human artifacts can ever again be made whole, even by the

Creator Himself. Yet, if there is any created thing in the known universe valuable enough to salvage, surely it would be those who are created in the image of God, and especially those who are being re-created in Christ. “Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Gal. 6:10).

The Christ

The God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ desires mercy. He extends rich blessings to the indefensibly guilty; surely, He will never condemn the innocent:

At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.²

The lovingkindness and mercy of God revealed in Christ lift us above our sinful past as we submit to His great salvation. He saved us “because of His mercy,” and calls us to become conformed to His own heart of love.

Consider the ministry of Christ as He came in contact with people who were broken and barely aflame with life. Although one could write volumes about Jesus' encounters with such people, four examples will suffice to show His attitude and response toward the broken flowers and blown out candles of humanity.

1. The Samaritan Woman At The Well (John 4:1-42)

The disciples have gone into the Samaritan city of Sychar to buy food. As Jesus rests by the well of the patriarch Jacob, being weary from His journey to Galilee from Judea, there comes a Samaritan woman to draw water. This woman is not merely a character in a story; she is a person of flesh and blood, encountering Jesus Christ.

The origin of the Samaritan race is described in 2 Kings 17. The Lord had brought judgment upon Israel's idolatry and other sins by exiling to Assyria all but the lowliest people of the land. This despised remnant of Israel eventually intermarried with the pagan nations which had been carried off to Samaria by the Assyrians. The result of this was the Samaritan race and religion, a conglomeration of Jewish culture and various pagan elements. So this Samaritan woman, in the eyes of many, is a half-breed and a heretic Her race and religious

background render her unclean and untouchable, as far as most Jews were concerned. Amazingly, Jesus begins to talk with her.

It is immediately apparent to Jesus that this woman has led a troubled life. She has left a trail of broken relationships and muddled emotions behind her. Jesus challenges her to confront herself: “Go, call on your husband and come back.”

Although not eager to discuss the details of her personal life with a foreigner, the woman replies to this extraordinary stranger with surprising courage and candor: “I have no husband.” Jesus mercifully (even if somewhat bluntly) relieves this poor burdened woman of her last vestige of ego-defensiveness: “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” She is a broken woman standing there before Jesus, utterly disarmed. There is no point in continuing the charade. He knows exactly who and what she is. The masquerade has ended, since this stranger has removed her mask. She can let down her guard. Why not? This Jew has penetrated her social armor at its most vulnerable point, and yet refuses to harm her.

By this time, the disciples have returned from their business in the city. The text says they are amazed

to find Jesus talking with “a woman”: not just this particular woman, but any woman. The view of women current among Jews of this time is expressed in the teaching of the rabbis:

*Let no one talk with a woman in the street,
no, not with his own wife.*

*Better that the words of the law should be
burned than delivered to women.*

*Each time that a man prolongs conversa-
tion with a woman he causes evil to him-
self, and desists from the law, and in the
end inherits Gehinnom.³*

The disciples apparently are not yet accustomed to Jesus’ defiance of religious etiquette in His dedication to doing God’s will. While they know better than to tell Jesus how appalled they are at His lack of social discretion, they probably cannot refrain from expressing to one another their inward reaction to their teacher’s scandalous behavior: “Why in the world is He talking with *her*?” On another occasion, two of these same disciples wanted to call down fire out of heaven to consume an entire Samaritan town that had refused to welcome Jesus because He was heading for Jerusalem. They were eager to blow out the candle, to break off the flower—and Jesus rebuked them for it.

And how many times have you and I passed judgment on somebody? How often have we said in our hearts, “This person is not redeemable; they have gone too far”? Do we not understand that the power of God’s Good News about His Son can save and restore the most broken of the broken? Would Jesus not say to us what He once said to James and John?

“You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.”⁴

Is the object of our criticism a Christian? Let us take care, lest we call “unclean” that which God has made clean. Is he or she an unbeliever? Our condemnation is not required; one cannot condemn that which is already condemned. That which is condemned needs redemption and healing, and that is why the Father sent the Son into the world. Jesus did not come to loathe the loathsome, but to love the unlovely unconditionally. Broken people need to be loved; they are literally dying to learn what real love is. Such was the need of this woman at the well.

This woman was broken, and yet Jesus Christ took time out for her. He refused to let the ignorance of His contemporaries deter Him from making contact with her, even though His own disciples were

also infected with bigotry. He spoke with her and led her into the way of righteousness. Her testimony later produced an abundant harvest of converts from her home town. One never knows; the most broken flower, the least flickering candle, can become a beacon of light and life that will guide others to the one who is the only harbor of safety for our lives.

2. The Woman Taken In Adultery (John 8:1-11)

On this occasion, certain insensitive and self-righteous scribes and Pharisees found what they called a “woman caught in the act of adultery.” With motives that were painfully transparent, these self-appointed deputies of divine justice brought her into the very temple of God, where Jesus was teaching. This would have seemed the perfect place in which to make their accusations: in the presence of almighty God, and at the feet of Jesus Himself. But this woman was not the true target of their malicious actions; she was but an expendable pawn in their plan to find Jesus guilty of sin.

John recalls that these religious leaders “made her stand before the group.” They put her on public display, a pathetic spectacle of shame and misery. These men, apparently devoid of human compassion or even of common consideration, intended to make

Jesus choose between (1) honoring God's law (thereby alienating the common people who heard Him gladly), and (2) recognizing the Roman rule (which forbade the Jews to practice capital punishment.).⁵

*"Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"*⁶

It was an ingenious ploy, well planned and designed to confront this young rabbi with an incapable dilemma. Jesus did not reply immediately. Instead, He stooped down and began to write on the ground with his finger. Finally, when He saw that the woman's accusers were determined to receive His answer, He stood up and said to them:

*"If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."*⁷

The prosecutors began to leave the scene, one by one, and thus was the trial canceled for lack of executioners. The woman stood alone with Jesus, face to face with the sinless Son of God, the only Man who would ever be qualified to judge and condemn her. His neither denied nor minimized her guilt; He did something far more scandalous and shocking instead. He *forgave* her!

A broken woman had been lovingly accepted and admonished to a whole and restored life. This is the power of the Good News of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”⁸

God's forgiveness is unmerited. It is a “just-as-I-am” forgiveness that flows freely from the gracious heart of God to the most defiled and depraved of hearts. This is the meaning of God's “Good News”:

Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.⁹

Christians too easily forget that God saved us, “not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy.”¹⁰ There is nothing in us that brought forth our salvation; its cause lies entirely within Him. We own no righteousness apart from that which God freely grants to us in union with Jesus, His Son. Even our response of love and faith toward God rests on the initiative of Jesus, our Savior. Our purpose in this world is to share this same merciful Savior with others who desperately need to “taste and see that the LORD is good.”¹¹ But how

can we best convince men and women that God has indeed opened heaven's windows and showered upon the spiritually starving world the very Bread of Life? How can we effectively carry a message of faith, hope, and love to those who have long since lost sight of faith, hope, and love?

I am convinced that the greatest method of soul winning that exists in our generation is the showing forth of the mercy of Christ. As the social and ethical implications of mechanistic evolutionary theories become increasingly clear to those who have been reared to accept these theories without question, we should expect this generation to become increasingly inhuman, uncompassionate, and violent. The opportunity is ripe for Christian mercy to stand out as an oasis of beauty and truth in a desert of ugliness and despair. I am not rejecting the various soul winning methods that Christians have researched and developed, but I must say that if our hearts are not moved by love, compassion, and mercy as we reach out to the lost and deal with fellow Christians, *we are absolutely wasting our time.*¹²

3. Bartimaeus, The Blind Beggar (Mark 10:46-52)

This incident occurred at the very height of Jesus' ministry. He had performed many undeniably miraculous signs, and had brought wholeness to many

whose lives had been physically, emotionally, and spiritually broken. A great throng was following Jesus as He left Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. A blind beggar known as Bartimaeus sat by the roadside, and having heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by his customary post, began to scream out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Several in the crowd tried to silence him. A modern paraphrase of their efforts to dampen the beggar’s burning enthusiasm would likely sound like this: “Shut up, man! Can’t you see that Jesus is too busy with God’s work to bother with a nobody like you?” But, whatever the antagonists said to Bartimaeus, he didn’t listen to them. Hope had been stirred within him and all of their efforts to crush it were bound to fail. This was Bartimaeus’ golden opportunity, his big break, and he clearly recognized it as such. If it was to be “now or never,” Bartimaeus had unalterably resolved that it would be *now*: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” A plea for help couched in the language of faith could never fail to gain the attention of Jesus. The Lord heard his cry and was not too preoccupied to care. Jesus was never too busy to light a blown out candle or mend a broken flower. “Bring the flower here, bring the candle to Me.” This was the motto of His entire ministry, and still is.¹³

The text states that this Son of Timaeus threw off his cloak, jumped to his feet, and came to Jesus. It

is probable that he ran, almost numb with anticipation of the critical moment, bumping blindly into one onlooker after another. At last, he heard Jesus ask him the question that would change the rest of his life: “What do you want me to do for you?” It was a question that Bartimaeus could answer without a moment’s hesitation: “*I want to see.*”

If Jesus’ brief interview with Bartimaeus seems a bit too anticlimactic to modern readers, it is only because many of us know so little about the dynamics of faith. Faith that moves mountains and opens blind eyes begins with the conscious realization of our deep need, and our personal inadequacy to meet that need. Jesus’ question was designed to bring Bartimaeus to a confession of faith, and Bartimaeus’ reply revealed his firm conviction that only Jesus could meet his need. I am convinced that there are many blind people who would want to see, except that they have never yet *consciously realized* that they cannot see. I am talking about people who are in the dark about the meaning and purpose of life. Unless God’s people stop condemning the innocent and start practicing the mercy of Christ, those who sit in great darkness may continue to hear rumors about something called “light,” but they will never personally see it. They will be far worse off than blind Bartimaeus; at least *he* knew what he needed, and where he should direct his cries for help.

4. The Parable Of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

No biblical passage has been used more to show the love and grace of God than this one. Most of us know this story of how a young man demanded his inheritance, left his father's home, and went into the "far country." In the words of the older brother in the story, he "squandered his property with prostitutes." He deliberately chose a selfish life, as he himself later confessed. When this young man got down to the bottom of his life in the far country, he took a job that would have disgusted any self-respecting Jew: he became a feeder of swine. Worse, he envied the swine for the swill that he fed them. At that point, he made what was undoubtedly the best decision of his life: "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."

Lately, I've been impressed with a new thought as I have read this text. In my mind's eye, I follow that son as he decides to leave the far country and return home. As I watch the young man walking down the dusty Palestinian road toward his father's house, the camera, as it were, shifts to a close-up of the father as he is working in the fields. As the

father looks and sees the lonely figure coming down the road, his face reveals a mind racing with excitement: “Can it be? *Can it be?* Is this my boy?” And, surely enough, *it is!* Forgetting all the deportment of patriarchal dignity, *the father runs* to embrace his son, and the young man begins to make the confession and request that he had previously determined to make: “Father, *I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.*”

Freeze-frame! At this point in the action, it occurred to me that, had this son been of an insincere heart, he could have said, “Why, look at this—the old man’s running! He seems eager to see me. Perhaps I won’t even have to say what I thought about saying to him while I was starving in the far country. Maybe he’ll just let me come right back in here and resume my rightful place in the house without my having to humble myself.” But instead, the genuineness of this broken flower is seen. As the scene continues to unfold, it becomes clear that the sinfulness and unworthiness of the son are not the determining factors in the father’s disposition toward him; they do not begin to explain the running father, his passionate embrace, or his fervent kisses. The source of these things is to be found in the father’s heart, and not his son’s. This is emphasized by the manner in which the father makes no direct response to the son, apparently interrupting

him before he can make his intended request. Instead of speaking to the son, the father turns to his servants:

*“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”*¹⁴

As important and profound as were the words of this father, equally impressive to me was what he did not say. Some fathers would have said, “That’s right, son; you’re not worthy. Go to your room and stay there until your mother and I can sort this out and decide what we should do about the way you treated us when you left home. You really should be ashamed of yourself. Get down and grovel some more.” But this father didn’t say anything like that. It was as though the boy hadn’t even admitted his unworthiness. “Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.” What kind of response is this to self-confessed guilt? How does God view the broken? How does He respond to a blown out candle? *Light* the candle; *mend* the flower! God does, Jesus does. And He calls you and me to do the same.

The Commitment

People are blowing out countless candles and breaking off entire bouquets of flowers, but even one would be too many. Many theological conclusions might be drawn from the depth of Jesus' teachings and example; it is obvious that I have not exhausted the concept of "broken off flowers and blown out candles," because it is so profound. It is the very essence of the heart of God. My only intentions have been to introduce the subject for the reader's consideration, to reveal something of its width and depth, and to give disciples of Jesus a basis for further biblical exploration and practical application of the mind of Christ. As one sensitive individual has said, "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." But of someone far greater, it is written:

He will not break the stem of a plant that has been bent. He will not even put out the flame of a wick that is barely burning. He will not break the reed that is already bent, and He will not extinguish the light that has almost stopped shining.¹⁵

How do we "break flowers" and "blow out candles" today? One way to find out would be to discover where our own attitudes and actions toward others differ from Christ's:

He does not fight nor shout; He does not raise His voice. He does not crush the weak, or quench the smallest hope.¹⁶

We break human flowers and blow out candles made of flesh and blood when we are *thoughtless, inconsiderate, unkind, and abusive* toward other people. We live in the midst of a violent generation that is lashing out and beating its own children to death. Throughout this affluent society, we have welfare services dealing with the battered child syndrome, the battered wife epidemic, the battered husband phenomenon. *Everybody seems to be beating on each other*, and especially within the family unit. We shrink back in horror at the news stories of those who batter their infants against a wall or sexually exploit helpless children. We are filled with outrage and disgust when we see the pictures of innocent children who have been “disciplined” with burning cigarettes, and many of us (thank God) can still become quite upset about the daily butchering of unborn human beings which our culture has sanctioned in the interests of our personal freedoms and economic well-being.

But let me propose a question to you, especially to you who are brothers and sisters in Jesus: How do you suppose we would react if, every time we used our God-given tongues to speak in unkind ways to one another, a bruise would appear on the

skin of the one about whom we spoke? What if a mark or a scar would appear on the body of another person every time we used our tongues as instruments of gossip and slander? Do you think that this might help us to consider a little more kindness, a little more mercy, that we might not condemn the innocent?

In Romans 14 (a chapter we must surely retrieve from mothballs, if we are serious about the Christianity of the New Testament), Paul is essentially asking, “Will we destroy the work of God, the brother for whom Christ died, by judging and condemning the justified? Will we tear down a brother with our accusations and criticisms, even though God is able to make him stand? Will we break off the flowers that God has planted? Will we blow out candles which Christ Himself has lighted?”

If we are going to truly follow Jesus, if we would be His genuine disciples, we must lay aside our insecurity and selfishness. God can surely take care of His kingdom and fulfill His purpose in spite of human weakness and fallibility. As we sow the seed of the kingdom of God, as we reach out to love, share, mend, and heal—let us not crush the weak! Let us resolve that we will not discard the broken and the bruised, that we will not snuff out the smallest flickering hope, that we will not despise even the mustard seed of faith that may be

there. Rather, let us see all people through the eyes of Christ, recognizing that each of us stands before God in need of mercy, compassion, help, and service. Above all, may God deliver us from an attitude of Pharisaic-type hypocrisy: of merely *talking* about these things but never getting around to the *doing* of that which should naturally flow out of that which we have genuinely *become*. It is not enough for us to grit our teeth and grind out deeds of “mercy”; we must first see people as God sees them, then treat them as Jesus would treat them.

A short story will help us to grasp the beauty of a loving attitude in dealing with the unlovely: The father of a certain almost-grown boy had reached the end of his patience with his rebellious and arrogant son. Night after night, this son would come home drunk, staggering around the house and abusing his parents with language that would pierce their hearts. The father finally washed his hands of the whole matter, but the mother’s love continued.

The boy came home one night, reeling with alcohol again, shouting his usual obscenities. Having concluded his drunken tirade, he stumbled off to his room and fell across the bed into his private oblivion. His mother went in to check on him. When she didn’t return, her husband went to see what was keeping her. There she was, sitting on

the bed with this big boy up in her lap, with both arms around him, rocking him back and forth as if he were a baby. The father stared disbelievingly at this spectacle: “How can you do that, after all he’s said about you and done to you? *How can you do this!*” The father was beside himself, trying to comprehend his wife’s behavior. Her response was, “This is the only time he’ll let me love him”—*and she loved him!* This mother refused to break off the flower; she would not give in and blow out the candle, for the boy was her own flesh and blood. She loved him as she loved herself. And do we not understand that when we give up on humanity—any part of it—we are really giving up on ourselves? Our human nature does not differ from that of any other human being; we are all of one kind.

The Conclusion

How fragile is human life? I’m told of a certain type of orchid that takes from five to seven years to mature, and even after this time of tender care and nourishment by the gardener’s hands, only one flower is produced each year. Is it possible that greenhouse keepers are more tenderly concerned about an orchid than we are about the delicate flowers which God has created in His own image, and the flickering candles that He has lighted with the gospel of His Son?

I promise before God that, to the best of my ability, I will not break off any bent flowers or blow out any flickering candles.

If *any* commitment or determination in our lives could be called “right,” then it is *right* that we surrender to the heart of God in reality, in every relationship of our lives, in response to His great love for us.

Because of His tender mercies, resolve today to light each smouldering candle you see, and mend all the broken flowers along the way.

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Notes

¹Matt. 12:1-12, 15-21.

²Titus 3:3-5.

³William Barclay, “The Gospel of John” (Vol. 1), *The Daily Study Bible Series*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 162.

⁴Luke 9:55.

⁵See John 18:31.

⁶John 8:4-5.

⁷John 8:7.

⁸John 8:10-11.

⁹Rev. 22:17.

¹⁰Titus 3:5.

¹¹Ps. 34:8.

¹²See 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

¹³See Matt. 11:28-30.

¹⁴Luke 15:22-23.

¹⁵Isa. 42:1-4; compare Matt. 12:17-21 (paraphrase, L. Deason)

¹⁶Matt. 12:19-20, *The Living Bible*.

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