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A Bruised Reed in the Hands of Christ

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"A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth" (Isa. 42:3).

WITH irresistible goodness, though unobserved by the present world, Jesus Christ is continuing His work. He will complete His plans. He cannot be discouraged, He cannot be broken. All that He has purposed to do He will do in the fullness of time and in the order determined by Himself. Through those whom He has chosen, though they be but bruised reeds and smoking flax, the Lord Christ Himself will do that which is necessary to bring order out of confusion and beauty out of that which seems only ashes. It is this blessed assurance which so often supports the Christian in his unequal and constant conflict. As the prophets were sustained by the promise of a coming Saviour who quietly, patiently, and lovingly would do the work of God without failure, so is the Christian supported by the truth that Christ has finished much of His work and will complete all in the appointed time. Jesus Christ "shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law" (Isa. 42:4).

All our hope is in the Christ who, being what He is, must be victorious. In the world there is no hope. In spite of centuries of preaching, the world seems to be entering upon another Dark Age. Intelligent men, contemplating the increasing paganism of what once were Christian countries, are saying, "God died yesterday,

leaving His whole estate in bankruptcy." Against the rising tide of unbelief the church speaks with an uncertain voice. We may take as an example the leader of one of the better churches of our day, who is training young men to preach. He speaks with great enthusiasm against the dead heresies of yesterday. He seems to be unaware—incredible as it may appear—of the heresies of our own day. If he intended to leave the impression of a sound faith in a sound heart he has succeeded with few of the people. It is more charitable to assume that he has deceived himself and is deceiving others. He is the type of leader who runs ahead of the crowd, encouraging them to continue in the way they have already chosen, unaware of the awful precipice ahead. He is typical of many; he is typical of the church.

In this situation in church and state which in the light of the Bible is clearly discernible, the Christian desires with all his heart just one thing. He wants to be strong, unmoved by the several winds of doctrine that blow so violently, but he finds himself often like a bruised reed. He wants to be a bright light in a dark place for Christ's sake. But he knows that he is only a feeble, flickering flame with more smoke than light. This is the source of his greatest distress. It is not the unbelief in the world, it is not the coldness and indifference, even the faithlessness, in the church. True, these all trouble him. But the cause of his deepest discouragement lies within himself. He knows that he is a bruised reed, that he is only smoking flax. It is in the hour when this is most deeply felt that the Christian hastens

to his Bible and looks carefully and prayerfully at the picture of the Christ drawn by the hand of Isaiah: "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" (Isa. 42:2, 3).

Now as one looks at this picture and thinks of its several parts, it becomes clear that the important thing is not the bruised reed and the dim burning wick, but rather the person who protects and restores this bruised reed and nourishes the feeble flame with oil. It is not a surprising thing that there is a badly bruised reed; it is a surprising thing that it is not crushed. It is even more surprising that there is One who has the patience and the power to restore that bruised reed. We will, of course, have to consider the reed in its bruised condition, and the wick giving so dim a light, but only in order that we may better understand the work and the person of the Servant who restores the reed and makes the wick burn brightly.

Who Is the Servant?

Of whom does the prophet speak? Who is the Servant? We cannot understand the work of this Servant without being perfectly clear as to who He is. For what is done in the restoration of the bruised reed depends entirely on the nature of Him who alone does the work.

We are fortunate in having an interpretation of this passage in Isaiah in the words of Matthew. It is found in about the middle of his Gospel (Chapter 12:18-21). After the writer has observed carefully the work of the Lord and the way in which the Lord Jesus did His work, he concludes that the description of the Servant given by the prophet exactly fits the Lord Jesus. Matthew invites the reader to think about all that has thus far been written concerning the Christ. Matthew even states specifically that Jesus Christ did His work in this manner in order that everything written by Isaiah might be fulfilled in the Christ. Whatever may have been true before His birth, after His birth Jesus Christ was no longer free to choose His work nor even the method by which He would accomplish it. Both His

work and the manner of His doing it had been exactly described before by Himself, and in the fullness of time Jesus came to do it in that one way.

The Servant, then, is the Lord Jesus Christ who emptied Himself of His glory and came into this present world which still is like a bruised reed and a dimly burning wick. It is important for the man who is concerned about the truth to confess distinctly that Jesus is the Christ, the servant of the Lord in whom God's soul delighted. Without the Christ of the gospel there is no hope for this world. "The old Adam cannot in the eternal nature of things found a new order. He writes Utopias on paper and practices the cruelties and vices that were immemorial when Babylon was young." It was a Jew who penned those words. It was a Jew thinking of the persecution of his own people, and what he wrote is true in a far wider sense than he meant it. The time is past when with shallow optimism we thought we were building a new world, and confidently told the young people that they could by their powers, if they would, build such a world. There are those more sensitive than the mob, who are anxiously searching in the deepening shadows of what seems to be the approach of another Dark Age for something which will quiet their fears. And still, as before,

it is the same Lord Jesus Christ in whom only there is hope.

There is the Servant in whom God's soul delights, upon whom He has placed His Spirit. There is the Servant who, being what He is, can and now is performing a work in the world. It is possible for us to confess our faith in this Saviour by saying Jesus is the Christ, though it is not always a confession of faith to say this loudly. For there are still sections of the so-called Christian church where it is unsafe to say anything else, where at least the words must be employed. There is a dead orthodoxy. Men are aroused only when the old familiar sounds no longer strike the ear. To say that Jesus is the Christ in the groups that sleep in order not to disturb them is, of course, no confession at all. It is possible to tell interesting stories about the good Jesus who lived long ago—and be fairly well paid for it. It is possible to preach excellent sermons with beautiful illustrations that stir the feelings for the time being. But is it possible so to confess this Christ of the gospel that men are first deeply troubled by the confession and afterwards find their peace in the Christ thus confessed? Is it possible so to speak of Christ that men are thinking about Him long after the spoken word is heard no more and the speaker himself is forgotten? For the ablest, for the strongest man *in his own power* it is not possible. All are like bruised reeds and all are like dimly burning wicks. The true confession is possible only when the Christ upon whom God has placed His Spirit lives and works in the heart of the confessor.

The Work of the Servant

The prophet speaks of the Servant's work in the beautiful words, "A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench." The attempt has been made to distinguish in thought between the bruised reed and the smoking flax. Someone has said that the bruised reed represents Israel, while the smoking flax represents the Gentiles. Israel, by her constant rebellion against the Lord, is become like a bruised reed, which only the Saviour can restore. The Gentiles who have begun to accept the gospel are like

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A Bruised Reed in the Hands of Christ

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dimly burning lamps, but the Saviour will make bright burning lamps of them. Another has said that the bruised reed is the man who has been wounded in the conflict with sin and the Saviour will restore him, while the dimly burning lamp is the beginning of good in the heart, which the Lord Jesus will nourish and strengthen. It seems far better to remember that in this passage we have a bit of Hebrew poetry in which the same thought is expressed in different ways. The bruised reed and the smoking flax represent the world and the church and the individual who have fallen into sin. And in the case of each of the three it is only the Christ who is the Saviour. The life of our Lord gives many illustrations which make the beautiful words of Isaiah plain.

Observe the Lord working quietly in the world. He is standing before Pontius Pilate. He is standing there alone. Angels are crowding heaven's gate to stand with their Lord before this judgment seat, but Jesus Christ does not give the word of permission. Most of Jerusalem is fast asleep. His voice which is not heard in the street does not arouse the sleeper. Jesus Christ sees the dictator of the Roman Empire, the fourth kingdom of the world, standing behind the judge who is being tried this day and found wanting, and looking that dictator full in the face, He says, "I am the king, and my kingdom is not of this world." In the hands of this King is the judge, and the ruler of the world also. Christ so controls the events of the hour that the highest authority on earth cannot do otherwise than nail Him to the cross. And yet Christ does this in such a manner that the judge and the ruler are responsible for the deed done and shall reap the proper reward. Only God could do that.

Whenever the kingdoms of the world are contrasted with the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is the fashion to speak of the power of goodness and the inherent weakness of lust though it be supported by mighty armies. There can be no doubt about it, pride and greed are no solid foundations upon which to build a kingdom. But the world is slow in learning that lesson and quite clearly has not learned it even in our day.

We are not now thinking of the power of goodness, nor the inherent weakness of pride and lust. We are thinking of the mighty Christ in whose hands are all rulers of this present bruised world where the light of the truth burns so dimly. The dictators will have their little day, the mighty business interests of the world their tiny play, but Christ rules over all. He is now restoring the bruised reed and the flax will burn brightly.

Observe our Lord working quietly in the Church. Matthew gives us an excellent illustration (12:1-21). The commandments concerning the Sabbath day were the commandments of men. And on the Sabbath day Jesus healed the man with a withered hand. It might have been done on the following day. Many a professor of our time would have earnestly advised the Lord Jesus to do it on the next day. It would be far less offensive, it would be more tactful. Jesus was training the twelve. If He healed on the Sabbath day He would be setting an example of giving offence. But the Lord gave another interpretation of quietness which is not mixed with sin, and He was tactful but without concealing the truth. There were many with withered hands in Israel, but Jesus healed this one only and on the Sabbath day. The word is spoken, the deed is done. The Jews cannot ignore either the word or the deed. They hold a council against Him. How effective and how tactful is the Christ. If the Jews had held no council against Him the reed had been broken and the smoking flax quenched. How effective and how tactful is the Christ. If Jesus had remained in their midst and allowed the full publication of His miracles he would have been like some magician seeking His own glory. But He withdraws and allows no man to speak now of His work.

Jesus Christ is yesterday, today, and forever the same. He is still accomplishing His work in the Church which He purchased with His own blood. It seems to many of us now a badly bruised reed and there is far more smoke than light. There is so much smoke, indeed, that many observers of our time who see only the outward appearance of things express the conviction that the church is dying. Men are speaking of the receding wave of the Christian faith. If the Christian faith were an ethical system or a philosophical view of life, we would all be constrained to think

that the Christian era is passing, and we know not what will take its place. But Jesus Christ is Christianity! Christ, the Servant of the Lord upon whom God has placed His Spirit, is the object of the Christian's faith. Though the church may degenerate still farther, though men who say they love the church may become even more "tactful" in concealing the truth, yet Jesus Christ will not break the bruised reed and the smoking flax. He will not quench.

Observe the Lord Jesus Christ working with individuals. Peter, having denied his Lord three times, was, as he went out into the night to weep bitterly, a bruised reed and his lamp burned so dimly that there was very little light. While Peter wept he did not know how near Jesus was, nor how He was preparing him for the best confession he ever made. For, to be sure, Christ was in the soul of His disciple. The day came finally when Jesus asked Peter, "Lovest thou me more than these?" Peter appealed to the full knowledge of His Lord. And Peter was restored. It is not the only case in the Gospels of the bruised reed that was not broken, of the smoking flax that was not quenched, but it is one of the more familiar cases where Christ restored the individual.

The Christians who live nearest to their Lord, whose fellowship with their Saviour is intimate and deep, know best how much like bruised reeds and smoking flax they are. With a desire to be strong for Christ's sake, their weakness is their constant source of pain. With a longing to let their light shine that their Father in heaven may be glorified, their smoking wick is their own deepest distress. Those who do not understand the Christian's lamentations over his own shortcomings ascribe them to a disordered liver or a digestive upset. But the Christian still knows he is not without hope. Indeed, though his wick smoke never so badly he is filled with hope. For is there not a Saviour who does not break the bruised reed, who does not quench the smoking flax? It is surprising that the reed is not crushed, but it is a fact that the Lord Jesus will never do it.

There is one Lord who in the world and in the Church and among the elect is working today. And the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. For Jesus Christ is not a bruised reed and He is not faint.

How the Servant Works

There is a final thought in the text. The prophet also speaks of the way in which the Servant will do this work of which we have been speaking. "He shall bring forth judgment unto truth," or according to another translation, "by the truth he will bring forth judgment." It is not difficult to understand how the Lord Jesus is doing His work. It is by the process of separating the true from the false. He is separating the wheat from the tares without injury to the wheat. He is taking apart that which God has never joined together. Before Pilate He sharply distinguishes between His kingdom and that kingdom which is of this world. In the church His explanation of the Sabbath day is in principle and in practice totally different from that which men have made it. He shows Peter the truth and pronounces the gentle judgment

in which Peter finds full liberty: "Thou shalt go where thou dost not desire." By the truth Christ is bringing forth judgment.

If we have difficulty in understanding the manner in which the Christ does His work it may be due to the color-blindness of our day which sees everything gray. But Christ saw a brilliant light and inky darkness. Only as we sit at His feet, clothed and in our right mind, will we also see that brilliant light and the inky darkness, and be delivered from the gray made by men. And so the last becomes the first, for what we need the most is to distinguish between light and darkness.

"A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth." "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and the King of glory shall come in."

parted from Him.

Let us examine this position briefly, and see where it leads us. It leads us to the absurdity that it makes no difference what church a person is a member of, so long as it was once a church of Christ. Followed out logically, one could not possibly justify the Protestant Reformation, for *precisely this same argument* was used by the Christians who stayed in the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation. They drew the analogy between the New Testament Church and the Old Testament nation of Israel, and while they admitted that their church was terribly bad, they insisted that God was still with it.

Calvin's remarks in this connection (*Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. II, Section IX) are much to the point and should be read by those who hold that, because the prophets remained in Israel when it had become corrupt, therefore we should remain in a corrupt church organization. Calvin's statement is in response to those who would argue that the reformers should remain within the Romish church, but it is remarkable how apropos it is of the present situation within the Presbyterian churches. He points out truly that the prophets had no corporate part in the guilt of the corrupt worship of Israel, and they were unmolested in their true worship of the Lord. But when the church of our day sins, who is it that shares the guilt? It is the individual members. There is now no divinely appointed king or hierarchy. The courts of the church originate with the people, and the people are responsible for the actions of those courts. What those courts do, the people do. In particular, when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. in 1936 through judicial process solemnly declared itself to be in agreement with apostasy, it spoke for the members of that church, and the only recourse for them was silently to accede to the sin and share in its guilt, or leave the church. Furthermore, the analogy breaks down for in our day there are a number of branches of the visible church. It is not as in the time of the prophets when there were not two churches—Judah and Israel—but only one church. The separation of Israel from Judah was not the separation of a good church from a bad one, but the separation of certain tribes for reasons entirely un-

Excuses That Don't Excuse

"SEPARATION FROM APOSTASY IS NOT REQUIRED IN SCRIPTURE"

THERE is a large group of ministers and members in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. who are perfectly willing to admit that their church has become apostate, but they contend that, even though that is so, the Scripture does not warrant separation from apostasy. This group includes most of those ministers and laymen who, before the separation came in 1936, were friendly to our position but who now are trying desperately to justify their remaining in an apostate church. They are quite generally people who love the Lord and preach and teach His gospel while retaining their relationship to what they admit to be apostasy. Being Bible-believing Christians, they seek to justify themselves from Scripture, but, unfortunately, they are compelled horribly to misuse Scripture in order to make it teach that separation from apostasy is not Scriptural.

They use the analogy of the Old Testament prophets and their relationship to Israel. Their argument runs something like this: The Prophets of Israel, Elijah, for instance, were not told to separate themselves from Israel even when Israel had given itself over to the worship of Baal. In fact, when Elijah left Israel,

the Lord ordered him to return (I Kings 19). Therefore, it is our duty to remain in the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., even though it be now apostate. The Lord remained with Israel even when it had departed from him and, just so, the Lord is with the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., even when it too has de-

"Thank You"

TO YOU who so promptly responded to the appeal for foreign missions funds last month, a hearty "Thank you" is extended. You will be glad to know that the missionaries were paid in full. The committees count on your help to meet their budgets each month, \$1500 for home missions and \$1000 for foreign missions. Send all contributions to the Rev. Robert S. Marsden, general secretary, 506 Schaff Building, Philadelphia, Penna.