



BARREN TIMES TEST AND BUILD OUR SPIRITUAL BONES

In what seemed like the blink of an eye this autumn, our lush mountains and byways became stripped and stark. The leaves turned colors but fell fast, largely due to the fierce winds and torrential rain of Hurricane Helene and her aftermath. Consequently, we have a somber, winter landscape early this year. But while lamenting the short burst of color, I am noticing things I haven't seen before.

For instance, on my oh-so-familiar dog walking route along our street, I saw broad wreckage caused when a towering oak tree toppled in the hurricane. But adjoining it, I saw a slender tree still standing, stripped of leaves but with the twin extensions of its trunk still erect in a strong, interdependent embrace. It spoke to me of the strength amid hard times found in God's beautiful designs for marriage and Christian community. This powerful visual had previously been hidden by the lush foliage of summer, but was revealed in the newly stark landscape.

Spiritual revelation can happen in the stark seasons of life as well, when the abundance and beauty of easy times fall away, and life strips us down to our spiritual skeletons.

Although those situations feel barren, they can be spiritually fruitful, revealing both the measure of our faith and the durability of God's love (Romans 8:35-39). We can look to the Bible to learn from people whose spiritual bones stood strong when stark seasons of life came upon them.

In the Old Testament, we see Joseph go from the privileged life of the favorite son of a prosperous man, to the woeful plight of an anonymous slave of a foreign master, overnight. Through that and many subsequent hardships and temptations, Joseph's trust in God led to stronger faith and greater usefulness, even amidst his adverse circumstances (Genesis 37-50).

Similarly, Daniel went from living in a noble Hebrew family in Judah, to living in exile as a captive in pagan Babylon. Not fazed by this, he stayed faithful to God and the practices that kept him focused on God (Daniel 1; 2:16ff; 6:10). His unwelcome circumstances constricted his life, but expanded his view of God.

Almost no one in the Bible had a more severe stretch than Job. After years of abundance in every way, Job's life turned bitterly austere. He suffered crushing losses on every front – family, livelihood, health, community. He was stripped of all he held dear, yet clung to God amid his tragedies. Therefore, Job's spiritual bones were strengthened, not broken, as he submitted to God while gazing into the deep mysteries of divine sovereignty.

But Job's is not the ultimate story of trials in a bleak season. For that, we look to Jesus, who set aside his unbounded glory as the Son of God to take on human flesh and bone, for our sake. Although all things in heaven and earth are his (Colossians 1:16), He willingly humbled himself as a human peasant in order to personally deliver God's love and life to us.

And although Jesus dreaded the humiliating and brutal way of the cross (Matthew 26:36-46), He allowed himself to be arrested, stripped, beaten, and hung on a tree to die, effectively wrapping his loving arms around us there for eternity. The truth of God's desire to save us was clearly revealed, like the strength of a beautifully barren tree in winter.

Praise God for the spiritual clarity that emerges in the barren stretches of life. Such times serve to strengthen the bones of our faith, as we look to the One in whom we still hope and trust when days look bleak.

As the psalmist David prayed in a dim time, "Be merciful to me, O God...for in you my soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge, 'til the storms of destruction pass by. I cry out to God Most High, who fulfills his purpose for me" (Psalm 57:1-2).

With love in the Lord,
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