

When God Removes What's Good

One of the delightful surprises our house offered us when we moved was an established rose bush and rosemary bush in the backyard. That first year we enjoyed their fruit—a vase full of bright yellow roses and readily available fresh herbs! But several years later, having been too busy to care for them, neither plant has produced anything worth celebrating.

Roses were replaced by thorny overgrowth and vibrant green rosemary by brown and brittle leaves. My backyard is not better from my indifference. In the world of gardening, pruning is caring.

When I consider the last decade of my life, I see a series of deaths:

- Death of my pride through living in the shadow of my husband's giftedness.
- Death of my fear of conflict through divorces in my family and among friends.
- Death of my fear of confrontation through difficult friendships.
- Death of my desires through multiple miscarriages.
- Death of my fear of failure through situations where I could not win.
- Death of my hope in myself through seeing my exposed sin in high-definition focus.

Each season of dying has felt just like that—dying. The choking out of something I have loved, desired and clung to for hope, peace and safety. The choking out of things in me, writhing, gasping for breath and praying, “Does it have to be *this* way? Can't I follow You and also keep this with me? Does it really need to die?”

In God's kingdom, pruning is caring. Jesus is the true vine, His Father the vinedresser. Every branch in Jesus that bears

fruit, the Father prunes that it may bear more fruit (John 15:1-2).

God's answer to my question is yes. Yes, it does need to die. It must be pruned. Without pruning, my life will become something even I don't want—an overgrown, thorny bush with no fruit to offer.

I don't beg God to be indifferent toward me. I don't ask Him to intervene only on my terms. But when that branch I love becomes the subject of His shears, I realize that's exactly what I wanted—His indifference and Kelly-approved intervention. But indifference is a form of hatred. Love, rather, proves itself in pain. Case in point: the cross. God-inflicted pain is like the surgeon's incision, wounding only to improve health.

How Are We Pruned?

What do the shears of the Vinedresser feel like? First, they feel exposing. Ungodliness in my heart that I've become an expert at ignoring is laid bare. A misplaced hope, a committed self-exaltation agenda flowing in the undercurrents of my heart, a consistent preference for my own comfort at the expense of those I say I love.

Secondly, they create a crossroads. No longer able to ignore my naked sinfulness, I have a choice to make. Let self-preservation kick in and grasp all the tighter to those thorny branches, or in terrifying faith cling to my true vine—the only good thing I have—and prepare for the death of letting go.

This choice is present in every pruning season: To what will I cling? Christ as my life or the candy-coated poison of my sinful longings? The answer is painful, yet always clear. Even when tempted to grab hold of the thorny overgrowth of my life, deep down, I know it's killing me.

Lastly, God's shears bring grief. The mourning of something lost. Never mind that the severed branch was harmful to my soul; I still grieve. The grief is often the loss of a lackadaisical way of life that this freshly exposed sin has destroyed. Now that I see, I must change. Either by hardening my heart or by repenting. Simply ignoring is no longer an option.

The Affirmation of Pruning

However, amid the dying, we find an encouragement:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that bears no fruit, He takes away. And every branch that bears fruit, He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:1-2).

Pruning is an affirmation of two things. You are attached to the true vine, and you are producing fruit. The requirement to receive God's painful affection is producing Jesus-dependent, Jesus-exalting deeds. Do you feel the sting of the shears? Rejoice that you are truly His and that He is using you.

After years of pruning, my heart has begun to recognize the hope found in these moments. I really am His!

"Endure discipline; God is dealing with you as with sons. For what son is there whom a father does not discipline? If you are without discipline, of which everyone has partaken, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we have had human fathers, and they corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live?"

"For they indeed disciplined us for a short time according to their own judgment, but He does so for our profit, that we may partake of His holiness. Now no discipline seems to be

joyful at the time, but grievous. Yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:7-11, emphasis added).

The shears of discipline still hurt, but for all who welcome it, this pain will yield an invaluable harvest.

I finally pruned my rose bush and rosemary plant this month. I boldly cut each plant to less than half its size, knowing the overgrowth is draining the plant of its ability to thrive. If I hope to enjoy any more fruit from these plants, this is the only way. And like my plants, the removal of my sinful overgrowth is the only path to spiritual health.

Are your circumstances inducing a death in your life? Do you feel the shears? This is your call to recognize that His pruning shears, though painful, are His kindness to you. His loving care. His affirmation that yes, you are a legitimate child of God! Yes, you have brought forth beautiful, faith-filled, Jesus-exalting fruit! Your Father’s goal is to deepen your joy in Him and your fruitfulness for His kingdom through these painful moments. Cling to your only hope, your true life source, your true vine—Jesus. And be content to let everything else be cut away. {eo}

*Copyright © 2001 – 2016 Revive Our Hearts. **Kelly Needham** hopes to persuade as many people as possible that nothing compares to simply knowing Jesus. She is married to Christian singer/songwriter, Jimmy Needham, whose ministry of sharing the gospel through song takes him all over the world. After spending many years traveling with her husband as his road manager and violinist, Kelly came off the road to be a full-time mom to their two young daughters. Find more of her blogs at .*