The Bruised Reed

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On the House of Mirrors, the Servant of Justice, and the King Who Will Not Quench the Smoldering Wick

There Was Something for Everyone

There was something here for everyone today. That is the gift of the kingdom: the gospel arrives in different tones for different ears, and the same Spirit speaks the message a particular hearer most needs to hear. Matthew 11 captures this perfectly. Jesus says of John the Baptist:

> For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ But wisdom is justified by her children. (Matthew 11:18–19)

Two messengers. Two tones. Same message. *John came as an austere desert prophet (camel-hair garment, locusts and wild honey, hard prophetic preaching*) and the establishment dismissed him as demon-possessed. *Jesus came eating and drinking with publicans and sinners, gentler in approach, sitting at tables with the wrong people*, and the same establishment dismissed him as a glutton and a drunkard. *They rejected both messengers for opposite reasons*, which tells you that the resistance was never really about the messenger’s style. It was about the unwillingness of the hearer to be reached at all.

And Jesus' summary is wisdom is justified by her children. God is going to give every person an opportunity to hear in the tone they need to hear him in. The justice of God is such that it provides that opportunity. At the end of all time, God will be vindicated as righteous. We come up with philosophical questions, what about the person who never heard?, and I cannot give you a tidy systematic answer to that. What I can tell you is that we serve a just God, and that God is not going to allow any one of his children to be lost without an opportunity to choose to trust him. That much I am confident of. The shape of that opportunity may be wider than we are able to see. Wisdom is justified by her children.

The House of Mirrors

And worship is about being *re-oriented* away from a certain kind of self-reflection that has been deforming us. Listen to what I want to call the *house of mirrors*, the cultural condition most of us were formed inside before we came to the Lord.

Many of us have lived in a house of mirrors that reflects only the darkness of our own souls. The contemporary West has built an entire civilization around the proposition that *I am the top, bottom, side, and center of everything that matters about my life*. *I gotta be me.* The slogans are everywhere. *Live your truth. Follow your heart. Be authentic to yourself.* And there is a tiny grain of truth in some of these, the warning against living for the approval of others has its place. *But underneath the slogans is something darker.* If *everybody is just me*, then we are all reflecting only ourselves back to ourselves. *That is a reflected darkness.*

Watch the logical chain. *If I am I in my own origin*, then I have no Creator. *If I am my own creation story*, then there is no narrative larger than mine into which my life can fit. *If I am my own destiny*, then I will set my own trajectory. *I will paddle my own canoe.* An older brother in our tradition used to push back on the *I will paddle my own canoe* slogan with a wry

diagnostic: *are you sure you even have a canoe?* That is the precise question. The self-sufficient man assumes he is the captain of his vessel. The deeper question is *whose vessel?* The water beneath the canoe, the wood the canoe is made of, the air filling the lungs that propel the paddle, none of it is his. *The self-made man is paddling a borrowed canoe across borrowed water with borrowed lungs, congratulating himself on the destination he has chosen.*

And inside the house of mirrors, we *become self-deified*. We reflect only what is going on right here in us. The walls bend in. The light dims. The image that comes back to us is only ever ourselves. *And what God is looking for is something different*. Listen to Isaiah:

> Thus says the Lord: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist," says the Lord. "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word." (Isaiah 66:1–2)

On this one will I look. Not on the self-made man. Not on the impressive temple-builder. Not on the polished professional with the carefully curated platform. *On the one who is poor and of a contrite spirit, who trembles at God's word*. The self-made man will always be an idolater. *He will always reflect only the inner pride and arrogance of his own house of mirrors.* But God is looking for the broken-spirited one whose inner walls have come down, who looks up rather than across, who hears the word of God and trembles. *That is the one God dwells with*.

Matthew's Portrait of a Different Kind of King

Now bring all of this as backdrop into Matthew's careful portrait of Jesus. Matthew opens his Gospel with a genealogy that runs in seven cycles of seven generations:

"So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations" (Matthew 1:17).

Notice the structure. *Fourteen, fourteen, fourteen.* Two times seven, three times. *Forty-two generations from Abraham to the Christ.* But the structural point Matthew is making is that *Jesus is the climax of the seventh series of seven*. Just as Israel's calendar built toward the *seventh year* (the sabbatical year) and the *seventh sabbatical year* (the year of Jubilee, when slaves were freed and debts cancelled), so the history of Israel has been building, generation by generation, toward *the final sabbath-king*. *Jesus is Jubilee in person.* He is the freedom from debts. He is the release of slaves. *He is the rest at the climax of the long workweek of human history.*

And then look at how Matthew arranges the early ministry. *Matthew 5, 6, and 7,* the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus the new Moses giving the new law from a new mountain. *Matthew 8 through 12,* a sustained healing ministry. Eyes restored. Ears opened. Legs straightened. Demons cast out. Lepers cleansed. The dead raised. As I have said in other messages, every healing is also a reversal of the idolatry Psalm 115 names: *those who make idols become like them, eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, mouths that cannot speak, feet that cannot walk.* Israel had been shaped by what it worshipped, and the shape was deformed. *Jesus' healing ministry is, on one level, the systematic undoing of idolatry's deforming work*. Every healing is a person restored to the image-of-God shape they were created to bear.

And then *Matthew 12*. The crisis chapter.

Healing on the Sabbath

In Matthew 12:9–14, Jesus enters a synagogue on the Sabbath. There is a man there with a withered hand. Notice how Matthew sets up the diagnostic moment:

"And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?,' that they might accuse Him" (Matthew 12:10).

That they might accuse him. That is the darkness in the question. *Here is a man who has lived all his life with a withered hand*. The withered hand prevented him from doing the work most men of his time did. It also prevented him from *full temple worship*, because the priests' purity laws disqualified those with physical defects from certain forms of service (cf. Leviticus 21:16–23). He was not just inconvenienced. *He was excluded from the full life of the community in multiple dimensions at once.*

And the Pharisees are not interested in him. *They are interested in trapping the Rabbi who might heal him.* The man with the withered hand has become *bait* in their plot against Jesus. *That is what religious hardness does to people.* It stops seeing the suffering person in front of it and starts seeing the suffering person as a chess piece in the religious argument.

Jesus answers their question with one of his own:

> Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:11–12)

And then he heals the man: *Stretch out your hand. And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other* (Matthew 12:13). A man who could not work was now able to work. A father who could not lift his children could now lift them. A worshipper who had been

excluded from full temple participation could now participate. *Real, embodied, dignifying deliverance.*

And the response of the religious establishment?

"Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him" (Matthew 12:14).

They *plotted to kill him*. That is the depth of religious darkness when its categories cannot accommodate the work of God in front of it. *Someone restoring people to wholeness, to their created potential, and the response is to plot the killing of the One doing the restoring.* The Pharisees had been called to be *builders*: leaders of Israel commissioned to restore the people, gather the scattered, lead the nation back to its calling. *They were not thinking about restoration on this Sabbath day.* They were thinking about how to maintain their categories at the expense of the man whose hand had just been made whole.

The Rest of God Is a Whole Creation

And here is something I want you to hear carefully. *The rest of God is not the absence of activity. The rest of God is a good and whole creation*. Genesis 2:2–3 says God rested on the seventh day, and what he had rested *from* was not labor as such but *creating*: meaning that the creation was *complete*, whole, very good, not needing further intervention to be finally what it was meant to be. *The Sabbath rest celebrates the wholeness of creation.* Anything that disrupts the wholeness (sickness, oppression, deformity, demonic affliction, social exclusion) is *not Sabbath*. It is the *opposite* of Sabbath. *And the appropriate response to the Sabbath is to undo whatever is undoing creation's wholeness.* That is exactly what Jesus is doing when he heals on the Sabbath day. He is not violating the rest. *He is enacting the rest.* The withered hand that becomes whole is a tiny corner of creation being returned to its Sabbath state.

And we are *not meant to be sinners*. That is one of the most important confessions you can hold. We sing it (*I'm just a sinner, saved by grace*) and the *saved by grace* part is glorious, but the *I'm just a sinner* identity should not be where we settle. *Sin is not who we are at the bottom.* It is what we have become through the deformation of the Fall. *God's intention is the new creation in which we are who he created us to be.* Saved by grace, yes. Sinners by definition forever, no. *We are being made new.* The withered hand was not who that man was. It was what had happened to him. And when Jesus said *stretch it out*, he was speaking the man back into who he had always been intended to be.

The Servant Quotation

And then watch what Matthew does immediately after the Pharisees plot to kill Jesus. Matthew inserts the longest Old Testament quotation in his entire Gospel:

> But when Jesus knew it, He withdrew from there. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all. Yet He warned them not to make Him known, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: "Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, and He will declare justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, till He sends forth justice to victory; and in His name Gentiles will trust." (Matthew 12:15–21, quoting Isaiah 42:1–4)

Read that quotation carefully. *He will not quarrel. He will not cry out. No one will hear his voice in the streets.* In other words, *the Messiah is not going to do politics the way Caesar does politics*. He is not going to take on Herod. He is not going to challenge Pilate. He is not going to lead a coup against Rome. He is going to stay in the *remote places* (in Galilee, in the

villages, on the lakeshore) and the people who *desire with all their heart* to find him will find him. They will follow him around. They will trust him. They will receive new creation from his hands.

That is the kind of king Jesus is. *And we live in the perpetual Sabbath of that king's reign.* It is a good creation that God intends for every man, woman, and child to live in: wholeness, deliverance from the bondage of sin, the new song in the mouth that is not a death march but a celebration. *We are not just holding on until the bitter end.* We are waving palm branches now, in this present moment, as celebrants of a victory that has already been won.

Blasphemy of the Spirit

And in the same chapter, Matthew 12, Jesus says something difficult that we need to handle with care. After the Pharisees attribute his exorcisms to *Beelzebub, the prince of the demons,* Jesus responds:

> Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matthew 12:31–32)

People have spent centuries worrying about whether they have committed *the unpardonable sin*. Let me try to help. *The blasphemy against the Spirit is calling evil the very thing God is actually doing.* That is the precise diagnostic Jesus is making in context. The Pharisees were watching the Spirit of God *deliver* people from demonic oppression, and they were labeling the deliverance itself *demonic*. *That* is the blasphemy. Not the careless word spoken in a moment of frustration. Not the doubting question asked in a season of darkness.

Looking at the Spirit's work and naming it Satan. That is the move that closes the door, because it severs the very faculty by which a person could later perceive the Spirit's saving work.

And this is why I am very careful about judging other Christians, other faiths, other people sincerely trying to do good in the world. *Not because every sincere effort is right. Many sincere efforts are misguided.* But because *I do not know all the ways the Spirit of God is currently at work to bring about his kingdom of grace in this world*. There may be a thread I cannot see that ties a small act of grace happening in some other tradition to a much larger work the Spirit is accomplishing. And one day, when the wisdom comes that we do not yet have, we will pull on a thread and see how some minor act of mercy in one corner of the world had ripple effects on the other side of it, across generations. *Quick condemnation of what God may actually be doing is the precise behavior Jesus warns about*. Slow discernment, generous interpretation, and humility about what we cannot yet see are the appropriate postures. *Be careful what you call evil.* Some of what looks foreign to you may actually be the Spirit's work in a tone you are not yet attuned to.

Don't Fear, Like the Nations Fear

Now I want to take you back to Isaiah 41, because that chapter sets up the Isaiah 42 quotation Matthew uses, and the framing is important. Isaiah 41 is God *telling his people not to fear the way the nations fear*. The nations all around Babylon are *terrified* at the rise of Cyrus the Persian. And what is their response? They *build idols*.

> The coastlands saw it and feared; the ends of the earth were afraid; they drew near and came. Everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, "Be of good courage!" So the craftsman encouraged the goldsmith; he who smooths with the hammer inspired him

> who strikes the anvil, saying, “It is ready for the soldering”; then he fastened it with pegs, that it might not totter. (Isaiah 41:5–7)

Picture it. The nations are afraid. They huddle together. *Be of good courage*, they say to one another, while privately suspecting they are about to be overrun. And what is their plan? *To manufacture a god strong enough to withstand the coming threat.* The craftsman tells the goldsmith *make it well*. The smoother of metal tells the anvil-striker *hit it harder*. They examine the soldering. *Yes, that joint looks good.* And then, to make sure the god does not fall off the pedestal under the weight of his own statue, *they nail him down with pegs*.

That is the diagnostic. *A god that has to be nailed down to keep from falling over is not a god worth fearing.* And every time a culture starts strengthening its idols with extra nails (whether the idols are political, economic, religious, or personal) it is announcing that *its confidence in those idols is gone, but it cannot bring itself to abandon them*. The frantic activity of nail-driving is the loudest signal that the gods have failed.

And every time I find myself afraid, I come back to the same diagnostic. Fear in my heart is almost always a sign that my trust in God has slipped. Not always; there is appropriate physical fear in the presence of genuine physical danger. But the kind of fear that paralyzes, the kind that makes me reach for the hammer and the nails, that kind of fear is a trust problem. I fear because in that moment I am not anchored in the One I claim to follow. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). We do not have to fear the way the nations fear. We are not the ones nailing down the gods to keep them from falling over.

And the contrast comes immediately:

> But you, Israel, are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the descendants of Abraham My friend . . . Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will

> strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:8, 10)

Do not fear, for I am with you. That is the answer. Not more nails. Not better soldering. *I am with you.* And the table God prepares before us *is in the presence of our enemies* (Psalm 23:5). The enemies form their armies. The idols are nailed to their pedestals. *And we sit and eat at the Father's table while the threat gathers around the perimeter.* That is what trust looks like in real time.

Real Courage Looks Different

Let me say a word about what *Christian courage* actually is, because the popular imagination of it is often wrong. *Real Christian courage is not storming the castle.* It is not the muscular, sword-waving, politically aggressive religiosity that sometimes calls itself courage in our time. *That is not the courage of Christ.*

Real Christian courage is loving our enemies. It is the work of someone like the late Dr. Paul Farmer, taking the fiery arrows of our enemies and trusting that God is holding us. *That is what it means to follow Christ.* It does not mean we take up swords and become bold and brutish in this world. *The confidence in God that produces real boldness is the confidence to serve others in love when it does not make sense.* Loving the un-loveable. Forgiving the un-forgivable. Sitting at table with people the culture has told us to despise. Healing on the Sabbath when the religious authorities are watching for an excuse to destroy us. *That* is the courage of Christ. *Bold service in love, not bold aggression in the name of love.*

The Idol That Cannot Do Good or Evil

And listen to what Isaiah 41 says about the manufactured gods of the nations. After mocking the nail-driven idols, the prophet calls them forth as if into court:

> "Present your case," says the Lord. "Bring forth your strong reasons," says the King of Jacob. "Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them, and know the latter end of them; or declare to us things to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; yes, do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed and see it together. Indeed you are nothing, and your work is nothing; he who chooses you is an abomination." (Isaiah 41:21–24)

Read the diagnostic: do good or do evil, that we may be dismayed and see it together. Show us you can do anything. And the implied verdict: the idols can do neither good nor evil. They cannot act at all. They are nothing, and their work is nothing.

And then comes the line that should give every devotee of every idol pause: *he who chooses you is an abomination*. *You become what you worship.* If you worship a god who is nothing, you become nothing. If you worship a god whose work is non-existent, your work becomes non-existent. *The idolater takes on the inactivity of the idol.* And this is true whether the idol is political, economic, religious, technological, or personal.

Let me be honest about how this lands in my own life. I feel the slope. It is slippery. I can read enough of the news of our particular age, and steep in it long enough, that I begin to give it more validity than it deserves. I start to think politics might be the thing that saves us. Or economics. Or some particular cultural realignment. None of these things will save us. They are good in their proper place, yes. They are sometimes bad in their corruption, yes. But they are only reflections of the dark prisons we find ourselves in. They are not the deliverance. The deliverance is the King with the Spirit upon him who will not break the bruised reed and will not quench the smoldering wick.

A Nation in Its Own House of Mirrors

And here is the chilling extension. *If an individual in a house of mirrors is confusing, what is a nation in its own house of mirrors?* You can see what happens. Look at history's experiments. *The Russian Revolution* promised a utopian society. The *way* it would build that utopia was *the slaughter of everyone who disagreed*. By the time the dust settled in the gulags and the show-trials and the forced famines, the death toll was somewhere north of twenty million, *for what?* For a utopia that, in the event, never arrived. *This is what happens in the human project to build paradise on earth.* Every utopian movement of the twentieth century, from one end of the political spectrum to the other, was characterized by the same pattern. *Mass killing in the name of the better world that was always just around the next corner.* The corner never arrived. The killing remained.

That is what nations do when they enter their own collective house of mirrors. They reflect only themselves. They become their own creation story. They become their own destiny. And when the inevitable internal contradictions emerge, when the utopia fails to arrive on schedule, they conclude that *the problem must be the people who are not yet seeing the vision*, and they remove those people. *That is the pattern.* It is observable. It has run, with depressing regularity, in every century of recorded history.

And God has a mindset that is unsettlingly different. It is the unsettling reality of a kingdom created by a king who does not fight. Who does not quarrel. Who does not lift up his voice. Who is not beating his chest and sending out edicts the way the Caesars did. *He is sitting quietly and privately, in little homes and hamlets, on the backside of the desert, where sheepherders are.* He is gathering a few people. Healing a few sick folks. Going from town to

village preaching the gospel and restoring the broken. *That is the kingdom.* It is so quiet you can miss it if you are watching the centers of imperial power instead of the margins.

The Real Problem Is Not the Symptom

And let me make a careful pastoral move before we go further. We are sinners saved by grace, yes. But the sins themselves are usually not the root. Paul lists them in Galatians 5:19–21: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries. These are all symptoms of something deeper. The root is the failure to trust God. The symptoms diverge in their forms across different lives, but they share a common origin in the heart that has not yet learned to trust.

So the cure is not the laborious management of each symptom. We do not focus first on solving each particular sin. We focus on turning the heart toward Jesus and looking full into his wonderful face, to use the language of the old hymn, and then the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and his grace. When we orient on him, the symptoms begin to wither at the root. Not all at once. Not in any predictable order. But the root is being treated, and the symptoms in time follow. The opposite approach, attack each symptom directly while leaving the root untouched, produces moral exhaustion and very little lasting change.

My Servant Whom I Uphold

And now back to Isaiah 42, the chapter Matthew quotes at length. Listen to the whole opening:

> Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not

> break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands shall wait for His law. (Isaiah 42:1–4)

Count the appearances of justice. Justice to the Gentiles in verse 1. Justice for truth in verse 3. Justice in the earth in verse 4. Three times in four verses. The Servant of the Lord is fundamentally a justice-bringer. But the kind of justice he brings is described by what he does not do as much as by what he does. He will not cry out. He will not raise his voice. He will not break the bruised reed. He will not quench the smoldering wick. The justice is gentle, persistent, refusing to crush what is already half-broken.

And the Gentiles are explicitly in the field of his mission. He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. The coastlands shall wait for his law. Israel had read these messianic passages and assumed the justice in view was justice for Israel against the Gentile oppressors. Matthew, quoting the passage in Matthew 12, makes the wider reading explicit: the Servant's justice is being extended to the very Gentiles Israel had hoped he would crush. The promise was always cosmic. The first-century Pharisees had narrowed it. Matthew restores its original width.

The Bruised Reed

And now sit with the two images that have given this chapter its title.

A bruised reed he will not break. Picture a reed by the water: already cracked, already bent, already half-dead. The natural human response, if the reed is in your way, is to *snap it off and toss it aside*. It is no longer useful. It will not stand straight. *Why bother with it? The Servant does not snap it off.* He does not consider the bruised reed to be in his way. He bends down and tends it. He sees what the cracked stem could yet become if it were allowed to heal. In a country

full of millions of reeds, the bruised one would not be missed if it were removed. But the Servant comes to the bruised one with the intent to heal.

Are you the bruised reed? Have you been bent by life into a shape you did not choose? Have you been cracked by a wound that has not yet healed? You might think we live in an eight-billion-person world that the God of heaven does not particularly attend to. He has sent his Servant, filled with his Spirit, to bind up the brokenhearted and to heal the stroke of their wounds. He is not in the business of throwing bruised reeds away. He is in the business of restoring them to what they were created to be.

And smoking flax he will not quench. Picture a wick whose flame has gone out, only a small ember still glowing, a thin trail of smoke rising from where the fire was. The wick is barely alive. Another hour and the ember will fade to ash. *The natural human response, if the wick is no longer giving light, is to pinch it out and replace it with a working one. The Servant does not pinch it out.* He bends down and breathes on it. He brings fresh oil. He fans the smolder into a flicker, the flicker into a flame, the flame into something that can light a room again.

Do you have one ounce of faith in your life? *Then the Servant will not snuff you out.* He will not look at your spiritual ember and say *not enough; replace with a brighter believer*. He will bend down. He will breathe on you. *He will fan that ember into something that surprises both you and the people around you.* The kingdom is not impatient with smoldering wicks. *It specializes in them.* The Servant who has the Spirit upon him is the One who knows how to turn embers into fires.

Who Created the Heavens

And the chapter goes on. Listen to where Isaiah locates the Servant in the cosmic order:

> Thus says God the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and that which comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk on it: "I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, and will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house." (Isaiah 42:5–7)

Look at how Isaiah piles up the creation-language. God created the heavens and stretched them out. In Hebrew, the verb stretched out has the sense of hammered out, the heavens hammered into shape over an unimaginable span of time. Stretched like a garment across the cosmos. God spread forth the earth and that which comes from it. He gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk on it. The crowning work of all that creating (the stretching, the hammering, the spreading) is the moment when God breathed his own breath into the people he was making. That is the climax of creation.

And then, having located himself as the cosmic Creator, God *takes hold of his Servant by the hand*:

> I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, and will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house. (Isaiah 42:6–7)

Hold your hand. The cosmic Creator who hammered out heaven also takes the Servant by the hand. The Servant is given as *a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles*. The mission is to *open blind eyes, bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house*. *That* is the Servant's commission. Not the breaking of jaws. Not the storming of

Caesar's palace. *The opening of blind eyes. The freeing of prisoners from the dungeons of their own house of mirrors.* That is the work. And the Servant has been called to it by the One whose hand he is being held in.

When We Get Out of Our Own Way

So here is where the chapter lands for us. *When we will get out of our own way*, when we will stop assuming we are the beginning and the ending of our own life, when we will stop believing that *justice begins and ends with our own grievances, with our own hurts and pains and mistreatments,* when we will turn that around and look out at the needs of the people around us, who are bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, *that is when this strange and gentle kingdom begins to operate through us*.

The King who has the Spirit upon him *binds up the bruised. He fans the smoldering. And he commissions us to do the same.* We are the body through which the Servant continues to work. Every time we see a bruised reed and refuse to snap it off, every time we see a smoldering wick and bend down to breathe on it rather than pinch it out, *we are participating in the Servant's work. That is the form of justice the kingdom enacts.* Not justice as retaliation. Not justice as the imposition of the winner's terms on the loser. *Justice as restoration of the broken, healing of the wounded, opening of blind eyes, freeing of prisoners.* That is what the Servant has come to do. *That is what he is doing through us.*

How I Fight My Battles

And we have to trust that this kingdom is *a little weird*. It is not how the world fights. The strange way of the kingdom is captured in the old story of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20:

> And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed those who should sing to the Lord, and who should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army and

> were saying: “Praise the Lord, for His mercy endures forever.” Now when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushes against the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah; and they were defeated. (2 Chronicles 20:21–22)

The singers went out ahead of the army. That is how Jehoshaphat fought his battle. *Singers in front, soldiers behind.* And by the time the army reached the battlefield, the enemy had already destroyed themselves. *The Lord set ambushes against them while the singers sang.* That is the kingdom’s strange military doctrine. *Praise first. Combat, if any, afterward.*

That is how we fight our battles. *Through praise. Through trust. Through commitment to God and to one another.* We see the bruised, and we heal. We see the smoldering wick going out, and *by God, we breathe on it*. We let our worship go out ahead of us into the day, and the obstacles that should have crushed us turn out to have been undone by some hand we never saw at work. *Praise as battle. Trust as weapon. Service as victory. That is the strange kingdom we serve. And it is the only one that finally wins.*

So be the body of the Servant. Be the hands that do not snap the bruised reed. Be the breath that does not quench the smoldering wick. *Be the singers who go out ahead of the army.* And trust that *the King with the Spirit upon him is bringing forth justice to victory in the earth*, exactly as Isaiah said he would, exactly as Matthew said he was, exactly as he is still doing (gently, persistently, refusing to crush what is already half-broken) in every life that turns its face toward his.