

Read these scriptures out loud with me, please:

The LORD hears His people when they call to Him for help. He rescues them from all their troubles. ¹⁸ *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.* ¹⁹ *The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time.* Psalm 34:17-19 NLT

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me, for the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed. Isaiah 61:1 NLT

I want to tell you a story. Alan Nelson tells the following story from his youth:

He watched the taming and breaking of a young stallion horse when he was a young teenager. The animal's wild, untamed spirit caused him to keep a safe distance on the outside of the corral.

“From across the barnyard I watched a man carrying a saddle walking toward the corral. He was a middle-aged cowboy with a ten-gallon hat, cowboy boots and a bow legged stance. This sauntering image from the west seemed out of place on an Iowa farm where workers wore T-shirts, overalls, round-toed work shoes and many a cap from the local feed store.

Today was the beginning of the end of the stallion's self-centered life. His unbridled neck would soon be bound by the tightness of leather. His belly would constrict as the cinch was fastened to hold the saddle in place. He would taste a metal bit for the first time. Today would mark a noticeable change in the animal's behavior.

As the cowboy neared the fence where I stood, I heard the jingling of his spurs. Although the fence was not high, the man grunted as he flung the saddle onto the top board. He relaxed noticeably after he unloaded his burden.

The horse stopped his nervous pacing. He looked at the cowboy and seemed to sense that something was about to change. From around the corner, the cowboy brought out a five-gallon bucket half full of shelled corn. As the man held up the bucket, the horse trotted over to the concrete deck below the fence. The horse stuck his long nose into the feed bucket, and the cowboy gently approached him and gingerly placed a rope halter around his head, sliding it behind the tall ears. The horse stepped back hesitantly but returned quickly for more corn.

The cowboy spoke softly to me. “He's been halter broken for several days now. Yesterday, we started bridle-breaking him.”

“When can you ride him?” I asked.

The cowboy grinned, a seasoned grin. “We're gonna try him today.” The cowboy turned around and removed the halter from the horse's head. He then took a leather bridle from the fenced saddle. He comforted the jittery stallion by putting his arm around the

horse's thick neck. He quietly and smoothly placed the constellation of leather straps on the horse's head and fitted the steel metal bar into his mouth. The tall steed resisted.

"Easy boy. Good boy," the cowboy said reassuringly.

He held the reins and began slowly walking the horse around in a big circle in the corral. The horse responded nervously, taking anxious steps to the left and to the right. The cowboy continued to speak encouraging words to the animal. As he returned to the fence, he tied the reins to the post and replaced the bucket of corn under the horse's nose.

Then he lifted the saddle from the fence and walked alongside the tall stallion. The cowboy bent over, and with one hand on the saddle horn and the other grabbing the back edge of the seat, he gently tossed it onto the horse's back. He carefully let down the stirrup on the opposite side as the horse returned to the grain. The cowboy reached under the animal's high belly and grabbed the cinch. The man slowly but confidently slid the straps through the appropriate rings. Then in a swift, strong gesture, he pulled the cinch strap, securing the saddle to the untamed animal's back. The inexperienced animal reeled against the tightness. "Easy boy, good boy."

The cowboy stepped back. He continued to encourage the beautiful beast but gave the horse some space. After a few snorts and halfhearted bucks, the horse returned to the almost empty bucket.

From my precarious perch on the fence, I wondered what the cowboy would do next. Just like in the movies, he united the reins from the post and cautiously approached the wild stallion. Swiftly he placed one boot in the left stirrup and swung his right foot over the tall horse. For the first time the stallion carried a rider. The horse turned ninety degrees and began running and kicking to the far end of the corral. In spite of the cowboy's verbal affirmations, the stallion continued to resist the rider's invasion. He bucked and snorted and bellowed. The twisting jumps threw the cowboy off balance. Two bucks later, the cowboy tumbled to the dirt below. Like a seasoned veteran, he brushed himself off, picked up his hat, and watched as the horse ran away. As he walked toward the fence he said, "We'll try it again as soon as he gets calmed down a bit."

Sure enough, several minutes later, the steed's frantic pacing subsided and he returned to the replenished corn bucket. Suddenly but smoothly, the cowboy remounted the horse. Again, the stallion jumped left and then right as he arched his back. Several more times the horse trotted and bucked, trotted and bucked, but soon the majestic beast ran smoothly.

The cowboy practiced turning, galloping, and stopping. "Whoa, thatta boy." The horse gave some rebellious snorts and reared up a few times. But within the hour the cowboy was riding the once wild-spirited, now domesticated animal. The horse was authentically broken."

There are moments, seasons and circumstances that will happen in our lives that break us. Most of the time we view these times as negative but in this series I want you us to push past that notion of negativity and learn to embrace the brokenness. We are going to learn about

brokenness and its positive attributes. Nobody likes it. Nobody prays for it generally. But it comes and we are tested by how we respond to it.

1. Breaking the soul

The last definition in the dictionary for broken is: reduced to submission; tamed. The human soul is much like the untamed stallion Nelson wrote about. Our soul is bounding with unbridled energy and action. There are times when it is majestic and powerful but it can also be stubborn and destructively dangerous.

When our souls remain unbroken we are of little value to the Kingdom of God and have little to no chance of reaching our potential. We have little capacity for constructive use when we are not broken.

An unbridled and untamed soul restricts God's work in a person's life and in the life and health of the church. Historically anybody who has ever done anything significant for God has been broken along the way.

We might want to run from it but in reality when God allows us to experience this taming of our soul it is important that we embrace it as God's will.

The longer I live and especially in the last few years of my life I am learning that there is a silent but common and active process in the building of a disciple called brokenness. I don't believe that people who have achieved much for God over a long period of time, or been used productively in ministry by the Holy Spirit, have done so without experiencing this process.

An unbroken person will refuse to accept difficult challenges and they will question unexplained events with great frustration. The unbroken will want success and the applause of achievement but more often than not, as master of themselves, they will experience dissolution, depression and disappointment. When we decide to go our own way and ignore the call to follow God and God alone we are setting ourselves up for heartbreak and failure.

This has application in every area of our lives. Brokenness will enhance lives. Believe it or not it will strengthen our marriages, our relationships, and our parenting skills. It will empower our effectiveness in ministry and our ability to be faithful. It will allow us to be helpful to the people around us.

2. Broken for good

My prayer for us is that by the grace of God you and I can change our perception that all brokenness is negative. There is a brokenness that is necessary for authentic discipleship. In fact, you can't be a follower of Christ at all unless you allow God to break you for good.

There are three parallels that can be made between a horse and taming the soul.

A. The world has very little use for a wild unbroken soul

A horse that is not broken to ride or drive does nothing but consume food and water. An unbroken soul is little more than a consumer. As our teaching this year continues to address our need in this church for authentic disciples, you are going to hear a very clear call to denounce the common and current notion of being church consumers. (In fact if you are just a consumer attender of church it is probably going to become very uncomfortable for you in this environment because I'm really weary of playing church) An unbroken soul occupies space (seats) and carries on many of the functions of a broken soul, but it preforms little good. Its activities don't carry much value in the eternal view of things.

I put this quote from David Platt on my Facebook this past week:

"We will not wish we had made more money, acquired more stuff, lived more comfortably, taken more vacations, watched more television, pursued greater retirement, or been more successful in the eyes of this world. Instead, we will wish we had given more of ourselves to living for the day when every nation, tribe, people, and language will bow around the throne and sing the praises of the Savior who delights in radical obedience and the God who deserves eternal worship." — David Platt

B. The breaking process ultimately strengthens the bond between rider, (cowboy, caretaker, owner etc.) and the horse.

Before being broken the owner of the horse can only admire from a distance. The only relationship is the basic and mundane feeding and watering. But once the horse is broken the bonding can begin.

Until a human soul experiences brokenness it can do little more than admire God from a distance. And it can acknowledge His ability to sustain it. Relationship and intimacy with God is pretty much nonexistent, He is just someone you sing a few songs to at church once a week.

C. The breaking process does not sap the strength of the horse. It is just as strong as before but now its abilities multiply many times over because this strength is no longer dangerous but directed.

The process of accepting brokenness does not make us passive, lazy or unmotivated. What it really does is energize and motivate the person to accept and reach their true potential. When you are not tamed or broken by God you are a wild card. Your life is left to you to run and manage and no person yet has ever done that successfully without God. Dangerous or directed? Which is it for you?

3. Better for it

There are times that people will struggle with this process as though to follow Christ wholeheartedly will mean that we give up our dreams and aspirations and settle for second best. Nothing could be further from the truth. The breaking process will turn us into an authentic

follower of Jesus Christ. Real honest disciples realize that we are better because we have been broken.

Sometimes people are broken and slip into bitterness, cynicism and low self-esteem. This leads to depression and the inability to function in our relationships and even in the daily things of life. The term broken is most often viewed as a negative but in reality if accepted and embraced properly it can be the way to move forward in life.

Viktor Frankl: *“Despair is suffering without meaning.”* Understanding brokenness gives us the ability to move beyond despair. Only after we embrace this concept can we be truly healed. We are born with clenched fists, but we die with open hands.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; He rescues those whose spirits are crushed. Psalm 34:18 NLT

We are a bottom line people in the western civilization. We read self-help books by the dozens and order products to change our lives, our waistlines, our emotions, and everything else in between.

We tend to put people on a pedestal who master the “doing” part of life. Some of the highest paid people in the world are those who can hit, run, pass, shoot and throw better than anyone else. We invest billions of dollars in athletic endeavors. Unlike other societies, which emphasize the development of the soul, we keep soul expansion to a minimum.

Listen until we see God’s desire to impact our minds and actions through our spiritual lives and development of our souls, we will not only be very frustrated with these aspects, we will fail to understand the episodes of difficulties and brokenness in our lives.

We are called to abide in Him. In John 15, we are challenged by Jesus to abide in Him. Our job, our goal, our task is to abide in Him. It sounds so dull that we don’t even understand the passion and promise of His challenge. You will never walk through an orchard and hear the branches of the fruit trees groaning or straining to bear fruit. Fruit comes naturally for the branches that remain attached to the Vine.

We love to focus on the production or doing but Jesus wants us to focus on the being. We will go across the country and pay big bucks to learn to be more productive in our “fruit bearing.” But Jesus was and is always more interested in us being better at abiding in Him.

Brokenness is about the process. It is a part of God’s character-building process.

Gordon MacDonald wrote, *“Almost every one of us, will encounter some issue that introduces us to brokenness at a far greater intensity than we ever thought possible. . . Broken worlds are a significant part of living, we must be vigilant enough to avoid the avoidable, but prepared and disciplined enough to persevere when facing the unexpected or the unavoidable.”*

Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of Billy Graham, has written a story, which she calls “The Mender.” “He had built for himself a great house on one of the Caribbean islands. It is a thing to behold. Tall rusty iron columns collected and resurrected with an ingenious homemade device. This Great House is a masterpiece of salvaged materials. A collector and seller of scrap metal as well as antiques, he was also fascinated with broken bits and pieces of chinaware from his front yard. Carefully he fitted and glued the pieces together. Few ever came out whole. They remained simply a collection of one who cared. When I expressed interest, he gave me a blue-and-white plate, carefully glued together — pieces missing. ‘You remind me of God,’ I said. By the look on his face, I knew I shocked him, and I hurriedly explained. ‘God pieces back broken lives lovingly. Sometimes a piece is irretrievably lost. But still He gathers what He can and restores us.’”

This story is a parable of the church - we are an unusual collection of broken people. But God has taken us, collected the pieces of our lives, and lovingly glued them back together.

By His grace, our brokenness has been transformed into something of purpose, of value, of beauty.

I’m calling for us as the people of God to embrace a theology of brokenness. We will not run from it. We need not avoid it. We take it as it comes and allow God to call us through it.

Watchman Nee

“Our spirit is released according to the degree of our brokenness. The one who has accepted the most discipline is the one who can best serve. The more one is broken, the more sensitive he is.”