What we can learn from Tree Stumps

A Devotional Guide

All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

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Dear friend,

The following is a message I shared at a One Challenge Day of Prayer. God used it to bless the group that day. Afterwards, I was encouraged to write down my thoughts. My hope is to share this encouraging message more broadly with friends and others in the OC family.

Being a full-blown message with three points (of course!), this booklet has three sections. Each section ends with some questions to consider.

You may want to use this as a devotional. Take a few days to work through it.
Let's begin!

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1. Enduring Stumps

One Thing They Teach Us

You may be familiar with Isaiah's personal encounter with the Lord in Isaiah 6, which begins with the words:

> *"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted seated on the throne...."*

Encountering the Lord and His absolute holiness, Isaiah is convicted of his own sinfulness. The Lord, in infinite mercy, initiates the needed cleansing. Then, the Lord sends Isaiah to bring a message to Israel and Judah. It's a hard message, a message of rebuke and God's judgment on His people, a thorough judgment (see 6: 9-13). In reading this passage, I was particularly struck by the words in verse 13.

> *"And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

I was drawn to the use of the word "stump." I began to ponder. What is it about the characteristics of stumps that point us to biblical truths, God's Word, the "holy seed," and the Lord himself?

First, a fundamental truth about stumps is they remain! They are deeply rooted, not easily removed. As we see in the passage, even in the thorough judgement of the people and complete destruction of land, the terebinth and oaks leave stumps. Stumps are deeply rooted, not easily removed. We have a picture of that today as there are landscaping services focused on stump removal. Just the other day, here in Colorado Springs, I saw a truck with "Anderson Tree & Stump Removal" emblazoned on its side!

I see a biblical truth being alluded to here. In life's journey, with its joyful and fruitful parts, and difficult and discouraging parts, like stumps, God's truths remain! His promises, purposes, and presence remain unchanging, unmovable, and deeply rooted in His character. Other passages in Isaiah underscore this truth.

> "*Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with my righteous right hand*" (Isaiah 41:10, KJV).
>
> "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flame will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior*" (Isaiah 43:2, 3).
>
> "*Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you*" (Isaiah 46:3, 4).

God's truths remain. His promises, purposes, and presence remain unchanged, unmovable, and deeply rooted in His character. May we, in mind, body and soul, rest securely in this reality ... **stumps remain!**

Questions to Consider

Read Isaiah 6:1-13. Stop and ponder verse 13.

In your life, or the life of a loved one, has there been a "cutting down" by the Lord? What was the situation? Was there a "stump" that remained?

Where in your life journey have you observed God's promises, purposes, and presence remaining like a stump?

Isaiah 41:10, 43:2-3, and 46:3-4 speak of God's unmovable, deeply rooted character. How have you experienced these truths in your own journey in life?

Talk to the Lord

In your own words, thank the Lord for the "cutting down" and the "stumps that remain." Acknowledge that His promises, purposes, and presence remain unchanged, deeply rooted in His unmovable character.

A Symbol

If you'd like, find a stump in your yard or a slice of a tree trunk. Use it as a reminder of these truths. If a friend or family member sees it, you can share the life lesson it represents to you.

2. Surprising Stumps

A Surprising Characteristic

Look again at Isaiah 6:9-13, where the prophet is sent by God to carry a hard message of rebuke and judgment on Israel and Judah. Read verse 13 again:

> *"And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

Focusing on the use of the word "stump" in these verses, let's continue to ponder. What is it about the characteristics of stumps that point us to biblical truths, God's Word, the "holy seed," and the Lord himself?

Stumps remain, stubbornly remain. They are not easily removed. This is the first obvious thing about them. Like stumps, God's truths – rooted in His character – remain certain throughout the course of our lives. We can rest securely in this reality!

A second thing about stumps, a surprising thing, is new growth can spring from a stump. Where there was apparent death (just a stump), new life can come forth. We had an illustration of this in the rear parking lot at the One Challenge U.S. Mobilization Center.

Some trees had to be cut down, leaving big stumps. These two pictures show a stump – early in the summer and late in the summer.

Early Summer

Late Summer

The biblical truth being alluded to by this surprising characteristic is seen in our passage: *"But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the* ***holy seed*** *will be the stump in the land."*

Not only does this stump remain, but also during judgment, death, and destruction, the "holy seed" planted there is the promise of new life, restoration, and renewal to come! Fresh growth can, and will, come to pass in a place that was seemingly dead.

This causes me to think about the places, cultures, and people we would look at, hoping to see spiritual life. Now all we see is death, a stump with apparently no life. Along with this troubling perspective, let's also realize at one point in time the "holy seed" was planted there. That means there is the real potential, the God-given hope, that new life can in fact spring forth afresh!

Scent of Water

In Job 14, interesting and encouraging words appear sandwiched between statements about the brevity of life and answering the question,

> *"If someone dies, will they live again?"* (Job 14:14).
>
> *"At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil,* **yet at the scent of water** *it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant"* (Job 14:7-9).

Even in a place of apparent death, no life, a dead stump, "... **at the scent of water** it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant." This causes me to think. What might be our part, our posture, in being "the scent of water" that the Lord will use to bring about new life where there is seemingly only death?

First, persevering prayer. Included in the liturgy of the Anglican Church, where my wife, Joyce, and I attend in Colorado Springs, are the *Prayers of the People*. A part in this is praying for those who we're desirous to see come to faith in the Lord Jesus. Almost every Sunday when it comes to this time, Joyce and I pray for a few dear friends. These are people who have a significant place in our lives, but, as far as we can tell, don't have a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus. We continue praying for them, but honestly wonder if our prayers are making any difference.

One of these friends visited us recently. As usual, it was a pleasant and enjoyable time of catching up with one another. For the most part, though, in these times there is very little sharing about personal, heart-felt needs. However, in our friend's visit, he was much more open and vulnerable to share personal, painful matters. We found him welcoming our words of care and encouragement and prayers for him in the moment.

After he departed, Joyce and I looked at each other with amazement. We were reminded those prayers on Sunday morning were not in vain. **Persevering prayer** for people, places, cultures can most certainly be used by the Lord, it brings "the scent of water" into a situation that appears to be a totally dead stump, resulting in unexpected and surprising new growth!

Second, waiting for God's timing. This is another posture the Lord uses to bring "the scent of water" into a situation where there is seemingly no life, a dead stump, which brings about unexpected new growth. This past spring our yard, plants, and bushes were emerging from their "long winter's nap." One of our bushes, a significant one, was not showing

any signs of life. For a few weeks I watched it, tended to it, pruned it, but there was no sign of life at all. Finally, after concluding it was dead, I called a couple of nurseries in town inquiring about getting a new bush. During the days I was busy with these activities, Joyce noted a little bit of green at the very base of the now truncated bush. I assumed it was just a weed starting to grow. But, as we watched it over a week or so, it became evident this indeed was the bush starting to bring forth new life – new life out of apparent deadness. During the months of spring and summer, the bush, perhaps more so than ever, continued to grow and flourish, displaying beautiful crimson flowers!

The application is this. In places, cultures, and people where we see only apparent death (no life) and we're tempted to just give up on seeing any life, tempted to uproot and just start over, we would be reminded that God's "holy seed" has been planted there and to wait for His timing in bringing forth new life. In this waiting posture, we partner with the Lord in bringing the life-giving "scent of water" into a seemingly spiritually dead situation.

Finally, repentance, being an instrument in the Lord's hand to guide one to a place of turning back to God, is also a means by which we can partner with the Lord in bringing "the scent of water" into a seemingly dead situation. In Daniel 4, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream where he sees a large tree in the middle of the land. A tall, strong tree, one with abundant fruit for all, one under which wild animals find shelter. But then the dream turns troubling. This very impressive, far-reaching tree is cut down leaving only a stump.

> *"Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground"* (Daniel 4:23).

As the wise men and magicians in the land can't interpret the dream, Daniel is summoned by the king to do so. The interpretation, which Daniel is hesitant to give, is troubling and terrifying. The powerful and far-reaching rule of King Nebuchadnezzar is about to be destroyed and removed from him. But, as an expression of God's mercy, a call to repentance is the path by which this kingdom, this "stump," this dead place, can once again flourish with new life.

> *"The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. Therefore, your Majesty, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be your prosperity will continue"* (vv. 26,27).

A call to repentance is this "scent of water" that leads to life. Besides being characterized by a caring, thorough, and restorative rebuke, it can also include a long-term commitment to the relationship where a person yearns for a change in their life journey. I think of Paul's words to the Romans about God's kindness and patience with us:

> *"... do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?"* (Romans 2:4)

As God's kindness and patience with us leads to repentance; our kindness, patience, and commitment to another can be an important part in bringing them to repentance, to newness of life.

Long-time friends of ours shared a story with us that illustrates this truth. It's a story of both persevering prayer and a long-term commitment to a relationship that has finally led to personal faith in Christ. Here's the summary statement in their own words: "For 25 years **we have prayed for him, have become good friends with him**, and a few years ago, started seeing little glimmers of interest, and now, as you'll read, he has finally made the bold step."

A surprising thing about stumps, a place of apparent deadness, is new life can spring forth at just "the scent of water." We can partner with God in being this "scent" through **persevering prayer, waiting on God's timing,** and **being a caring channel to bring about life-giving repentance.** Knowing this, may God-given hope take root in our hearts!

Questions to Consider

Think of a plant, bush, tree, or growing thing that looked dead and yet turned out to be alive. Can you think of a time in your life or the life of a dear one, where all seemed dead, and yet God brought new life and hope? Recount the circumstances and feelings that were part of that transformation.

Is there a current situation where you are yearning for the "scent of water" to bring new life? How might these three points find application in that situation?

- Persevering prayer
- Waiting for God's timing
- Repentance, being an instrument in the Lord's hand to guide one to a place of turning to God

Talk with the Lord

Share with the Lord a situation where you yearn for the "scent of water" to bring new life. Ask Him to reveal to you, or encourage your soul, how He is at work bringing a "scent of water."

A Symbol

Find a small branch and "plant" it in the stump or slice of tree trunk you found. Let this encourage you as you acknowledge God's desire to bring new life to what appears dead.

3. Transformed Stumps

Transformation – Ugliness to Beauty

Reviewing again the words in Isaiah 6:13, we read:

> *"And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."*

We've considered two characteristics of stumps that point us to biblical truths, God's word, and the nature of the Lord Himself.

First, stumps remain, deeply rooted, not easy to remove. Reflecting on this, we're reminded and assured in the changing seasons and

circumstances of life, God's promises and purposes remain unchanged, rooted in God's character. We can rest secure in this certainty.

Secondly, a surprising quality about stumps is in a place where there is seemingly no life at all, total death, new life can spring forth. At the "scent of water," the "holy seed" can bring forth new life as we partner with God in persevering prayer, waiting on His timing, and leading people to places of repentance. Knowing this, we will find God-given hope taking root in our hearts.

A third quality about stumps is that they're not attractive. That's why stump removal services exist. People don't plan on including stumps in their landscaping plans. The book of Isaiah contains several significant prophetic statements about the Lord Jesus. The "holy seed" is one. "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (7:14), is another. There are many others.

For me, the most graphic prophetic statement about the Lord Jesus is seen in the entire 53rd chapter of Isaiah, which begins with these words:

> *"Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.* ***He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him****. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem"* (Isaiah 53:1-3).

I don't believe this means Jesus, in his physical appearance as a man, was unattractive or ugly. But, rather, there was probably nothing striking about him in his physical appearance that would cause people to stop and declare, "Certainly, this is the Messiah!"

Though not ugly in his physical appearance, as Jesus is crucified on the cross, which Isaiah 53 graphically depicts, the whole event is very, very ugly, not attractive at all, "like one from whom people hide their faces…" Sometimes a newscaster will say something like this: "What you're about to see is very graphic. You may want to turn your eyes away for a few moments." As you and I truly behold Jesus on the cross, the Holy Spirit may say to us: "What you're about to see is very graphic, it's very ugly. You may want to turn your eyes away." In the hours of His passion on the cross, the stump, the "holy seed," is terribly ugly, not attractive to behold.

Recently, in helping clean up after a communion service, I noticed one of the communion trays with the cups filled with grape juice had been bumped. It was a mess, with juice splashed all over the top of the tray and running down inside. It certainly didn't reflect the usual tidiness of communion trays. Observing this, I began to think, this tray, with its messiness, was more of a true reflection of the cross than the others. Jesus' crucifixion was not a tidy event. Blood and water poured out. It splashed down the cross. It was ugly. It was terrible! It was a place of death.

Thanks be to God, though, this is not the end of the story! In Peter's first message following Pentecost, he reminds the gathered and bewildered crowd of Jesus' life journey, his teachings, his miracles, his betrayal at their hands, and his crucifixion and burial. And then moves to these victorious, history-altering words: **"But God raised him from the dead… it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him" (Acts 2:24)!**

That which was terrible, ugly, death itself has become beautiful, life-altering, and life-giving for all who would believe! Truly, in the resurrection, the "holy seed," the stump remains. Where there was only death, with no apparent hope, now life is flourishing out of deadness!

I think of these words from a contemporary Easter song, "Oh, the beautiful, terrible cross." Jesus on the cross, ugly, terrible, but the pathway to life, to beauty in time and eternity. "Hallelujah, what a Savior!"

Questions to Consider

Can you think of anything dead or dying that is aesthetically beautiful? Why is death ugly and sometimes terrible?

Stop and consider the ugliness of Jesus' death. Now consider the beauty God brought forth through his resurrection. How does the truth of his ugly death, which brings forth our beautiful life, impact you? How might it give you hope that God is at work bringing forth a beautiful life where things currently look ugly and terrible?

Jesus talked about the death of a kernel of wheat in John 12:24: "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." How did Jesus' death bring forth many seeds? How is it still bringing forth many seeds?

Listen to the Lord

What is the Spirit of God communicating to you regarding stumps and what you can learn from them? Be still and let the Spirit of God speak to you.

A Symbol

Feel free to add something or change your stump or slice of tree trunk to remind you of what you heard from God.

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