

## Stump Life – Ben Tolly

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Across America the favorite suburban subdivision tree in the past decade or more was the Bradford Pear. Sadly, its short life expectancy and susceptibility to disease has far outdone its pleasing and beautiful spring flowering. Adding disgust to the homeowner is the unpleasant discovery of shoots with two-inch-long spikes the strength of steel growing voraciously out of the stump of failed trees. The once-promising flowering tree has given way to loss, disfiguring growth and painful appendages.

Aren't you glad that such a story is not the truth of Isaiah 11:1? *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.* Isaiah calls us to hear again the good news of a God-story beyond our experience! Out of complete insignificance, God brings about His reality for those who would choose Him. Yes, a stump is a cut tree. Yes, a stump is a lost promise of seasonal beauty. Yes, a stump is ugly and signifies death. However, a beautiful shoot comes out of this stump of Jesse, signifying life and a future beauty!

The prophet Isaiah announces that our God was about to do the impossible, the surprising, the unscripted. Yes, our God was about to do the unthinkable. Life would spring from a stump—not just any life—not a life of an ignoble shoot that is less than the original tree. Something glorious and better than any could imagine was about to take place.

Today, if the appearance of your community, your ministry or your life has you hopeless, **take heart!** Appearances are deceiving when the God of Isaiah 11 is recognized and followed.

The Apostle Paul reminds his audience of this: *and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.”*

**Hope is the key product of this day of readings.** We see a hope prophesied in Isaiah 11 (*...The Gentiles shall hope*), a hope prayed for in the Psalm 72 (*May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor*), and a hope revealed in Matthew 3 (*One who is more powerful than I is coming*). In Romans 15 Paul tells us that, at one time, hard work and the Scriptures produced the promise of a hope. Then the Hope is revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to instruct that this Hope is not for a limited group but for all! He implores us that we must abound in it and display it by the power of the Holy Spirit!

Now I love hope! Before I broke my back my senior year of high school I was a talented basketball player, and had hopes to play at university. I had a tenacious spirit and, despite whatever the score was in a game my team was playing, I **always** believed we would win if we just kept giving our best effort and **never** gave up. Unfortunately, I played on many bad teams. (Once, our team went into half time down 30 to 4—and I had scored the 4 points!) Eventually, a team needs to produce. Some history, memory of victory, needs to back up the statements of hope. Otherwise, the team will not respond to the encouraging words voiced.

**This God of hope is not an imposter!** This God of hope is not an illegitimate shoot lacking the full DNA of the original tree. Paul desires to make this clear to us by quoting four promises in verses 9 through 12 of Romans 15. We could think of them as first century tweets. (Isn't that what folks like to do nowadays, tweet out quality, uplifting quotes on Twitter? Yeah.) Paul is tweeting out to his first century audience four promises that give us hope. Let me take a moment and focus on the four quotes the Apostle Paul highlights/tweets in this letter.

When Paul says in the first part of verse 9 that Christ became a servant so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy, he says in the second part of verse 9, *As it is written...* then quotes Psalm 18:49: *Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name.* Then he quotes Deuteronomy 32:43 in verse 10, *Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.* Following the Deuteronomy quote is a quote from Psalm 117:1 in verse 11: *Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him.* The last quote is Isaiah 11:10 in verse 12: *The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.*

This last quote... this is a significant and pointed promise. Verse 12: *The root of Jesse SHALL come.* He DOES arise to rule the Gentiles. In Him SHALL the Gentiles hope. The middle two quotes in verses 10 and 11 are commands or exhortations to the Gentiles: *Rejoice with [God's] people . . . Praise the Lord . . . Praise him.* And the first one in verse 9b is a testimony of a Jewish king standing in the midst of Gentiles, *I will confess you among the Gentiles.* But Paul quotes all four of these divine words to give hope. Think about this for a minute. When Paul gains knowledge of the plan of what God is going to do in history—bring all, not just a select group into the covenant—he sees hope for the Gentiles wherever God goes! **And where doesn't God go?**

Let us not forget that Paul is quoting Scripture. When he is on his way to pray for the abounding hope of the church he precedes that prayer with God's word of promise. Don't miss that. Scripture contains all things necessary unto salvation.

In this present world we find ourselves living with entertainment news, skewed commentary, known misinformation, and falsehoods utilized to create emotive responses. We must be clear on where our words of promise come from. Are they words of promise from a "line of Jesse" or are they from an imitation, a poor copy that brings ugliness and pain?

When a bank hires an employee, he/she is trained to recognize counterfeit bills. One would think that the best way to recognize a counterfeit would be to study various counterfeits. The problem is that new counterfeits are being created every day. The best way to recognize a counterfeit bill is to have an intimate knowledge of the real thing. Having studied authentic bills, bank cashiers are not fooled when a counterfeit comes along. A knowledge of the true helps them identify the false.

This is what Christians must do to develop spiritual discernment. We must know the authentic so well that, when the false appears, we can recognize it. By knowing and obeying the Word of God, we will be *trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.* We will know God's character and will. This is the heart of spiritual discernment—being able to distinguish the voice

of the world from the voice of God. And such knowledge brings **hope** to a fallen world, a world trying to fix the problems without God.

Paul ends by saying that joy and peace result in hope. God fills you with *joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope*.

Glorious life can spring from a lowly Stump. Embracing a Stump life means we know exactly from where our hope springs. Embrace this truth this Advent season!