

Broken Lives

by J.R. Miller

A broken life is not a failure, but rather an opportunity for God to use us in ways we never thought possible.

Scripture: Psalm 34:18, Isaiah 61:3, Matthew 5:14, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 12:9

Topics: "Brokenness", "God's Purpose"

Description

J.R. Miller's sermon 'Broken Lives' emphasizes that few lives remain unbroken, as most individuals encounter interruptions to their dreams and plans. He illustrates this through the stories of Harriet Newell, David Brainerd, and Henry Martyn, whose seemingly failed missions ultimately inspired countless others and contributed significantly to the cause of Christ. Miller argues that God often uses broken lives to fulfill His greater purposes, suggesting that our perceived failures can lead to profound impacts on the world. He encourages listeners to find comfort in their struggles, recognizing that brokenness can lead to greater usefulness in God's plan. Ultimately, the sermon reassures that even lives cut short can be complete in God's eyes, as they serve His divine purpose.

Transcript

There are few entirely unbroken lives in this world; there are few men who fulfill their own hopes and plans, without thwarting or interruption at some point. Now and then there is one who in early youth marks out a course for himself and then moves straight on in it to its goal--but most people live very differently from their own early dreaming. Many find at the close of their career--that in scarcely one particular, have they realized their own life-dreams; at every point God has simply set aside their plans--and substituted his own.

There are some lives whose plans are so completely thwarted, that their story is most pathetic as we read it; yet we have but to follow it through to the end--to see that the broken life was better and more effective--than if its own plan had been carried out.

The story of Harriet Newell is an illustration of a broken life. Listening to the cries of the perishing and to the call of duty--she sailed away as a missionary. She had in her heart a great purpose, and a great hope. She planned to devote her rich and beautiful life, with all its powers of love, sympathy and helpfulness, to the cause of Christ in heathen lands; she hoped to be a blessing to thousands as she lived a sweet life amid the darkness and heathenism, and told the story of Christ's cross, to perishing ones. With these desires and hopes in her soul, she sailed away to India--but she was never permitted to do any work for Christ among those she so yearned to save. Driven from inhospitable shores and drifting long at sea, first

her baby died, and then she herself soon sank into death's silence. In one short year she was--bride, missionary, mother and saint.

Truly, her life seemed a broken one--defeated, a failure. Not one of the glorious hopes of her own consecration, was realized. She told no heathen sister of the love of Christ; she taught no little child the way of salvation; she had no opportunity to live a sweet life in the midst of the black heathenism she so wanted to bless; yet that little grain of wheat let fall into the ground and dying there--has yielded a wonderful harvest. The story of her life has kindled the missionary spirit in thousands of other women's souls. Harriet Newell, dying with all her heart's holy hopes unrealized, has done far more for missions by the inspiration of her heroic example, and by the story of her life's sacrifice--than she could ever have done in the longest life of the best service in the field. The broken life became more to the world than it could have become by the carrying out of its own plans.

The story of David Brainerd is scarcely less moving. At Northampton, Massachusetts, his grave is seen beside that of the fair young girl whom he loved--but did not live to wed. His death seemed untimely, like the cutting down of a tree in the springtime when covered with buds--just ready to burst into bloom, and then grow into rich fruit. In that noble life, as men saw it, there were wondrous possibilities of usefulness. The young man seemed fitted to do a great work and he had consecrated himself on God's altar, with large hopes of service for his Master. But all these hopes and expectations were buried in the early grave of the young missionary, and to human eyes there was nothing left but a precious memory and a few Indian Christians, whom he had been permitted to lead to the Savior.

His seemed indeed, a broken life. But we must not write our judgments on God's work--until it is finished. A skillful hand inspired by tender love, gathered up the memorials of the fragment of consecrated life Brainerd had lived--and put them into a little biography. The book was wafted over the sea, and Henry Martyn, busy in his studies, read it. The result was that that brilliant young student felt his own heart fired with missionary zeal, as he pondered the story of Brainerd's brief but beautiful life, and was led to devote himself, with all his splendid gifts, to God for India. Thus the broken life of Brainerd became the inspiration in a distant country of another noble missionary career. And who can tell what other lives through this glorious missionary century, have likewise been kindled at young Brainerd's grave?

The story of Henry Martyn is that of another broken life. He went to India, and there laid his magnificent powers upon God's altar. He wrought with earnestness and with great fervor--but at the end there seemed to be small gain to the cause of Christ from all his toil and self-denial. Then, broken down, sick and dying--he turned his face homeward and dragged himself in great suffering and weakness as far as that dreary khan at Tocat by the Black Sea, where he crouched under the piled-up saddles to cool his burning fever against the earth, and there died alone among unbelievers, no Christian hand to tend his agony, no Christian voice to speak in his ear the promises of the Master whom, as it seemed to men, he had so vainly served." Both these young missionary lives appeared to be entire failures, wasted lives, costly ointment poured out to no purpose; but from the grave of Brainerd at Northampton and from the desolate resting-place of Henry Martyn at Tocat has come much--who can tell how much?--of the inspiration of modern missions. God broke the alabaster caskets which held their rich lives that the fragrance might flow out to fill all the world.

There is another class of broken lives--of those who, disappointed in their own early hopes and turned aside--yet live to realize in other lines and spheres than those of their enthusiastic choosing far nobler things than they could ever have wrought--had their own plans been carried out.

John Kitto, when a lad, met with a misfortune which seemed altogether to unfit him for usefulness. By a terrible fall he received severe bodily injuries and was rendered totally and permanently deaf. The result was the turning of his life into new channels, in which he achieved a marvelous success, becoming one of the most voluminous and most instructive of all writers of books to help in the illumination and interpretation of the Bible. God allowed the breaking and the complete shattering of the boy's hopes--that the man might do a far grander work in other lines. But for the misfortune that seemed to unfit him for any useful pursuit, and to leave him a hopeless and pitiable object of charity, he probably would never have been more than an obscure mechanic; but now his books are in hundreds of thousands of libraries and his name is a familiar household word in nearly every intelligent Christian home in the English-speaking world.

A young man at the completion of his theological course, offered himself as a missionary, and was accepted. Full of glowing earnestness and animated by a deep love for Christ, he sailed away to a foreign field, hoping there to spend his life in telling the story of redemption. After a brief experience, however, he was compelled to abandon his missionary work--and with great grief and reluctance return to his native country. Not only was his health broken--but he had permanently lost his voice in the experiment, and was thus disqualified for the work of preaching anywhere. It was a sad hour to the ardent young minister, when this fact became apparent to his mind. His was indeed a broken life. All his hopes and expectations of consecrated service, lay like dead flowers at his feet; he seemed doomed thenceforward to an inactive and a fruitless life.

So it appeared at that moment. But, returning to his own land, he soon found work for his brain and pen in editorial lines, and entered upon a service of incalculable value to the Church. In this field for thirty busy years, he wrought incessantly for his Master. God allowed his life as a missionary to be broken, that in another sphere--one no less important--he might render a service probably greater far than he could have rendered, had he wrought all his thirty years in a foreign land.

These are only illustrations of what God does with earth's "broken lives" that are truly consecrated to him. He even seems sometimes to break them himself--that they may become more largely useful. At least, he can use broken lives in his service--just as well as whole ones! Indeed, it often appears as if men cannot do much for God and for the blessing of the world--until they are "broken"!

God seems to be able to do little with earth's unbroken things, and therefore almost always he chooses broken things with which to do his work in this world. It was with broken pitchers that Gideon won his great victory. It was on broken pieces of the ship that Paul and his companions escaped to land after their shipwreck. It was by the breaking of Mary's alabaster box that the Master was anointed and the world filled with the gracious perfume of love. It was by the breaking of the precious humanity of Jesus, that redemption was made for man!

It is by the breaking of our hearts--that we become acceptable offerings on God's altar. It is by broken lives--broken by pain, trouble and sorrow--that God chiefly blesses the world. It is by the shattering of our little human plans--that God's great perfect plan goes on in us and through us. It is by crushing our lives until their beauty seems entirely destroyed--that God makes us blessings in this world. Not many men nor many women without suffering in some form, become largely helpful to others. It seems as if we could not be fit instruments for God to use, to speak his words, and breathe the songs of his love, and carry to others the blessings of his grace--until his chastening hand has done its sharp, keen work upon our lives!

A piece of wood once bitterly complained, because it was being cut and filled with rifts and holes; but he who held the wood and whose knife was cutting into it so remorselessly, did not listen to the sore complaining. He was making a flute out of the wood he held, and was too wise to desist when entreated so to do. He said, "Oh, you foolish piece of wood, without these rifts and holes you would be only a mere stick forever--a bit of hard black ebony with no power to make music or to be of use in any way. These rifts that I am making in you, which seem to be destroying you, will change you into a flute--and your sweet music then shall charm the souls of men. My cutting you--is the making of you, for then you shall be precious and valuable and a blessing in the world."

This little parable, suggested by a passage in an eloquent sermon, needs no explanation. The flute whose music is so sweet as we hear its notes in the great orchestra--was made a flute only by the knife that filled the wood with rifts and holes which seemed its destruction. Without these merciless cuttings it would have been forever only a piece of dull wood, dumb and musicless.

It is the same with most human lives; it is only when the hand of chastening has cut into them--that they begin to yield sweet music. David could never have sung his sweetest songs--had he not been sorely afflicted; his afflictions made his life an instrument on which God could breathe the music of his love--to charm and soothe the hearts of men. This is the story, too, of all true poetry and true music: not until the life is broken--is it ready for the Master's use. At best we are but instruments, musicless--except when God breathes through us.

Then, we cannot even be instruments fit for God's use--until our hearts have been broken by penitence, and our lives torn by suffering.

There ought to be great comfort in this for those who are under God's chastening hand. His design is to fit them for nobler usefulness, to make them instruments whose keys will respond to the divine touch and through whose rifts the divine Spirit can breathe strains of holy love. We ought to be better able to endure pain and suffering--when we remember what God is doing with us.

Thus we see that a life is not a failure--because it is broken. Broken health is naturally discouraging; but if God is in it, we need not be disheartened: he is able to make more of us with our shattered health--than we could have made of ourselves with athletic robustness.

Broken life-plans appear to be failures; but when God's great plan runs on in our life, without hindrance or interruption, through the fragments of our little purposes--there is no failure.

We groan over our broken days--when by outside interruptions, we are prevented from accomplishing the tasks we had set for ourselves in the morning; but if we give our day to God at its beginning, and he chooses to assign us other things to do than those we had purposed--his things instead of our own--we ought not to say in the evening--that we have had a lost day. What we call interruptions, are simply God's plan breaking into ours! There is no doubt that his way is better than ours. Besides, it is necessary for us all to learn our lesson of submission, and there is need for the discipline of interruption.

Many of God's children are found among earth's unsuccessful ones. This world has no use for broken lives; it casts them aside and hurries on, leaving them behind. Only successful men reach earth's goals, and are crowned with its earth's crowns. But God is the God of the unsuccessful. Christ takes earth's "bruised reeds" and deals with them so gently--that they get back again all their old beauty. No life is so broken, whether by sorrow or by sin--that it may not through divine grace enter the kingdom of God and at

last be presented faultless, arrayed in heavenly brightness, before the throne of glory! Heaven is filling with earth's broken lives--but there, no life will be broken or marred; all will be perfect in their beauty and complete in their blessedness, bearing the image of the Redeemer!

Many of earth's noblest and most useful lives, appear to end in the very midst of their usefulness, to be cut off while their work is unfinished--perhaps when it is scarcely begun. We easily reconcile ourselves to the dying of an aged Christian, because he has filled up the allotted measure of human life. We quote the Scripture words about a shock of corn coming in in its season; probably we lay a little sheaf of wheat on the coffin, or cut a sheaf on the stone set up to mark the place where the weary body sleeps.

But when a young person dies--we do not have the same feeling. We do not so easily reconcile ourselves to the ending of the life. We had expected our friend to live to be old, and are sorely disappointed in his early death. We do not quote the words about the corn, nor do we put the handful of wheat in the cold fingers or carve it on the stone. We seek for emblems rather which denote too early a death, cutting on the marble an unopened bud, a broken shaft or other symbol of incompleteness.

Yet when we think more deeply of the matter, should a death in bright sunny youth, or in mid-life be regarded as untimely? Should the life thus cut off be considered an incomplete one? Should not Christian faith lay the ripe sheaf on the coffin of the godly young man, and speak of his life, if it has been noble and true, as a shock of corn coming in in its season?

If every life is a plan of God--is not the date of its ending part of that plan? We would not call the life of Jesus incomplete, although he died at thirty-three. Indeed, as he drew to the end, he said to his Father, "I have finished the work which you gave me to do," and with his expiring breath he cried aloud in triumph, "It is finished!" It does not, therefore, require years to make a life complete. One may die young--and not depart too soon. It is possible for a life to remain in this world but a short time--and yet be complete according to God's plan for it.

To our view, it is a broken life--which is taken away in the midst of great usefulness. It seems to our limited vision--that everyone should live to complete the good work he has begun. But this is by no means necessary.

The work is not ours--but God's; each one of us does a little part of it, and then as we die--another comes and does his part just next to ours. One may sow a field and die before the reaping-time, and another gathers the sheaves. The reaping was not part of the sower's work. We may begin something, and then be called away before finishing it. Evidently, the finishing was not our work--but belongs to some other's life-plan. We must not say that a man's life is a broken one--because he did only a little part of some great and good work; if he was faithful--he did all that was allotted to him. God has some other one ready--whose mission it is to do what we supposed it was our friend's mission to do.

It is, then, a lesson of faith that we should learn. We ought never to be afraid of God's providences, when they seem to break up our lives and crush our hopes--even to turn us away as Christ's true disciples from our chosen paths of usefulness and service. God knows what he wants to do with us--how he can best use us--and where and in what lines of ministry, he would have us serve, or whether he would have us only "stand and wait." When he shuts one door--it is because he has another standing open for us. When he thwarts our plans--it is that his own plan may go on in us and through us. When he breaks our lives to pieces--it is because they will do more for his glory and the world's good, broken and shattered, than whole.

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