

Matthew 12:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.

Analysis

'A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory.' Isaiah 42:3 describes Messiah's gentleness with the weak. 'Bruised reed' (κάλαμον συντετριμμένον/kalamon syntetrimmenon) pictures damaged plant—bent, cracked, seemingly useless. 'Smoking flax' (λίνον τυφόμενον/linon typhomenon) describes barely-lit wick—producing smoke, barely flame. Both represent fragile, weak, struggling faith or people. Messiah won't 'break' the reed (finishing destruction) or 'quench' the wick (extinguishing faint flame). Instead, He gently nurtures and strengthens until 'judgment unto victory' (κρίσιν εἰς νῖκος/krisin eis nikos)—until justice triumphs, kingdom comes fully. Reformed theology finds great comfort: Jesus doesn't crush struggling believers. Weak faith is still faith; small flame is still alive. Christ patiently strengthens until faith grows strong. This challenges both harsh judgmentalism (breaking bruised reeds) and premature writing-off of struggling believers (quenching smoking flax). Pastoral ministry must imitate Christ's gentleness.

Historical Context

Reeds grew along Jordan River and Dead Sea—hollow grass used for measuring rods, writing pens, musical pipes. Bruised (damaged) reeds were discarded as useless. Flax provided linen for clothing and lamp wicks. Smoking wick—barely lit, mostly producing smoke—was typically trimmed or discarded. Isaiah's metaphor: Messiah treats weak, struggling, damaged people differently than human handlers treat broken tools. Jesus demonstrated this: He didn't reject doubting Thomas

(John 20:24-29), restoring denying Peter (John 21:15-19), welcoming fearful disciples (John 20:19-22). His ministry attracted broken people: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, demoniacs. He gentled restored them. Early church experienced this: persecuted believers whose faith faltered weren't automatically excommunicated; restoration was offered (though Donatist controversy debated how). Pastoral epistles emphasize gentleness in correction (2 Timothy 2:24-26). Throughout history, revivalist movements have shown both Christ's gentle restoration and harsh judgmentalism—the former reflects biblical pattern, the latter contradicts it.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How do you respond to believers whose faith is 'bruised reed' or 'smoking flax'—weak, struggling, barely surviving? Do you nurture or write them off?
2. What does this teach about pastoral ministry—how should churches care for weak, damaged, struggling members?
3. How has Christ demonstrated this gentleness toward you when your faith was weak or damaged?

Interlinear Text

κάλαμον συντετριμμένον οὐ κατεάξει καὶ λίνον

reed

G2563

A bruised

G4937

not

G3756

break

G2608

and

G2532

flax

G3043

τυφόμενον οὐ σβέσει ἔως ἀν ἐκβάλῃ εἰς νῖκος τὴν

smoking

G5188

not

G3756

quench

G4570

till

G302

he send forth

G1544

unto

G1519

victory

G3534

G3588

κρίσιν

judgment

G2920

Additional Cross-References

Ezekiel 34:16 (Judgment): I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.

Luke 4:18 (Parallel theme): The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

Psalms 147:3 (Parallel theme): He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds.

Revelation 6:2 (Parallel theme): And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

Isaiah 57:15 (Parallel theme): For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

Psalms 51:17 (Parallel theme): The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

2 Corinthians 2:7 (Parallel theme): So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.

2 Kings 18:21 (Kingdom): Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so is Pharaoh king of Egypt unto all that trust on him.

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