

# THE PARABLE OF THE ROSEBUSH

UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULT SEASONS



DAN SNEED



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Written by Dan Sneed

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Like so many things, a book or booklet, regardless of how brief or extensive, is never the work of just one person. It really takes a team of people who are willing to commit a significant amount of time and lots of hard work to complete the project.

When I think of all the people God has used over the years to help shape me into all I am, I am extremely grateful. Some of them were like pruning shears in the hands of the gardener. I didn't really understand what was going on, and I certainly didn't like it. In reality, they were simply the tools God used to accomplish his purpose in me and prepare me for greater fruitfulness.

Then there are the courage givers that kept cheering me on, praying for me, speaking hope and believing in me in the middle of the pruning process when I was just ugly sticks and thorns. Without

them it would have seemed hopeless at times. My family, especially my wife, Bev, and my friends have at times been both the pruning shears and the courage givers. I'm very thankful for them.

I'm also very grateful for my assistant and friend, Daniel Lopez, a young man who has not only inspired and challenged me, but somehow he manages to make sense out of the things I write. As you read this, I'm confident that you'll be thankful for him as well.

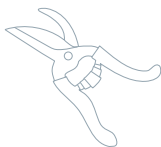
To the guys at Foursquare Missions Press, especially Bob Hunt who consistently encouraged me to write *The Parable of the Rose Bush*, thank you for your persistence and willingness to publish it.

You see what I mean? It takes a team; and I'm extremely grateful for mine!









## THE ROSEBUSH

Have you ever met anyone who rented a house because of the rosebush out front? Several years ago, my wife, Bev, and I were looking for a house to rent. Some friends of ours owned a home in the suburbs of Los Angeles. They were moving away and wanted to rent their house to us. Everyone looks for different things in a home and, lucky for me, Bev was far more practical when it came to what she was looking for. We needed enough bedrooms, bathrooms, and a big enough kitchen to accommodate a young growing family. This house had all of that and was in a safe neighborhood with good schools close by. Thankfully, the house had

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everything Bev wanted. I was sold from the moment I saw that captivating rosebush out front.

The rosebush produced beautiful long-stemmed roses throughout that spring and summer. I was so proud of that rosebush; in my mind, it could have increased the property value of the entire neighborhood. Between the fresh scents and multi-colored roses, it was perfect. However, by November, growth ceased and the amazing roses began to wither. I remembered hearing that rosebushes need to be pruned if you want them to be healthy, beautiful, and productive next season.

I grew up in Los Angeles and the closest thing I had to gardening experience was pulling weeds in the backyard whenever my parents made me do it. I decided to get a book that could teach me how-to-prune a rosebush. I found the perfect book at a local gardening shop. I say “perfect” because it was full of helpful pictures and diagrams. Of course, the book had plenty of other useful information, but

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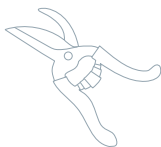
why take the time to read when the pictures make it look so easy? I thought, "Anyone can do this!"

Even though I never actually pruned a rosebush, I had seen many after they had been pruned and they always looked like a bunch of ugly sticks and thorns. That was the last thing I wanted, especially since this rosebush was right in front of the house where anyone and everyone could see. I had a very clear picture in mind of how the rosebush should look after I finished pruning. Basically, the plan was to prune the rosebush without making it look like ugly sticks and thorns. Even if the rosebush didn't produce beautiful roses, I still wanted it to look like a rosebush rather than ugly sticks and thorns.

After flipping through pictures and diagrams, I began my first pruning experience by very carefully cutting out some dead branches and then shaping it up just like I wanted. I didn't want to cut back too much. I was convinced that a snip here and a trim there would accomplish the purpose. When I fin-

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ished cutting, it looked exactly how I had pictured it. I successfully pruned my first rosebush and it still looked like a rosebush. I was so proud of myself. I thought I had mastered the fine art of pruning!



## THE PRUNER

A few days later, my friend, Darrel, stopped by my house for dinner. Darrel grew up on a farm and had done his fair share of pruning. I was particularly excited because he had been to the house before and had seen the beautiful rosebush in its full glory. When I saw him pull up, I couldn't wait for him to notice my expert pruning job and compliment my work. We walked up to the front door and the first thing he said was, "Dan, if you want this rosebush to be beautiful next year, it needs to be pruned." I thought he must have been joking. How could he not notice my expert pruning job?

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As you can imagine, I quickly let him know that the rosebush had already been pruned. His response was both patronizing and a little arrogant, “No Dan, it looks like you trimmed it a little, but it hasn’t been pruned.” I explained to him that I went to the garden shop, bought a book on pruning, grabbed some shears and followed the diagrams. I assured him it had been pruned, but he insisted that it had not. At the time, I felt a little insulted. I knew I had pruned the rosebush, at least, according to my definition of pruning.

Finally, Darrel told me to grab the shears so he could show me what he meant. I trusted his experience, so I didn’t hesitate. The minute he got those shears in his hands it was like something took over. He started cutting and seemed to lose all control. He kept cutting and cutting until it was just a blur of flying leaves and branches. By the time I could find the words to stop him, he had just about finished. I stood there in shock realizing that the pri-

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mary reason I rented this house had just been reduced to ugly sticks and thorns.

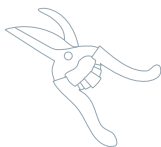
My beautiful rosebush was gone and my so-called friend destroyed it. Darrel was supposed to be an expert at gardening, or at least that's what I thought. Now this rosebush that I was so proud of had become everything I didn't want it to be. Worst of all, it was right in front of the house where everyone else could see it. I was furious. You can imagine how difficult it was having dinner with a serial rosebush killer. If he wasn't already there, I would have cancelled dinner. Actually, at that moment, I wished I'd never invited him over in the first place. Putting those shears in his hands was a big mistake. After the evening ended, I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to see him again.

For the next several months, I saw those ugly sticks and thorns every time I left the house and every time I came home. There was no sign of life at all. Of course I knew that spring would come, but I

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doubted the rosebush would ever be as beautiful as it was when it first caught my eye. Then one morning when I was heading to the office, I noticed little green buds beginning to sprout all over the rosebush. When I came home that evening, there were even more of them. It was as if something miraculous had happened! Suddenly, new life had begun to spring forth. Within just a couple of weeks, it was covered with bright green leaves and tiny rosebuds. That season, the rosebush became even more productive and beautiful than it had when we first moved in.





## THE MASTER PRUNER

It turned out Darrel knew exactly what he was doing. It was then I realized that I was far too concerned about how the rosebush looked and what others would think. Darrel pruned the rosebush for overall health, growth, and fruitfulness. While I was stuck in the moment, wanting it to look good now, he had his eye on the future and what the rosebush could become. As difficult as it is, pruning is an essential part of the growth process. It is as important to health and wellbeing as food and water.

During the dormant months after pruning, virtually nothing seems to be happening. Externally, the leaves are gone, the beautiful roses are only a mem-

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ory, and the thorn-covered branches are all that's left to look at. Not a pretty sight. However, during those same months, nutrients from the soil are being stored deep within the core of the rosebush in preparation for a new season. At the right moment, new life begins to spring forth and flourish.

I am always amazed by the similarities between my experience with the rosebush and how God prepares us for greater fruitfulness. Jesus often used common experiences to teach important life lessons. He would use analogies or a parable to communicate spiritual truth and values. A perfect example is the parable of "The Vine and Branches" in John 15:1-17. Jesus compares himself to the vine, his followers to the branches, and His father to the gardener. In this context, Jesus talks about the necessity of pruning. My story about the rosebush is much the same. Maybe we should call it "The Parable of the Rosebush." I like the sound of that!

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Since this experience, my actual pruning skills have only improved a little and I have also learned some important lessons about what I call spiritual pruning. Health and fruitfulness is always the purpose of pruning. In the parable of the vines and branches, Jesus is clearly talking about our lives and how spiritual growth takes place. Here are some things I've discovered about spiritual pruning.





## 5 LIFE LESSONS FROM PRUNING

### I. It is not optional:

**Pruning is an essential part of the growth process and there is no way around it.**

God knows the most effective way for growth to take place in each of our lives, and it will always include pruning. In other words, God doesn't ask if we want to be pruned, how we want to be pruned, or if it is a good time to be pruned. "I am the true vine and my father is the Gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful."

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We live in a world of options. They can be overwhelming at times, but we love having them. We enjoy restaurants with lots of choices, movie theaters with several screenings, and churches with multiple Sunday services. In fact, if what happens at your church isn't exciting enough, no problem! There are many others that promise much more excitement. If you decide you want to sleep in Sunday morning, try a Saturday evening service or even watch a live stream from the comfort of your own bed.

Because life has so many options, you would think that God could offer more options for spiritual growth. Even though there are numerous ways spiritual growth can take place, pruning is not an optional part of the process. Those in a relationship with Jesus will be pruned and God will choose when, where, and how. God is the expert and will prune every branch of our lives.

Most of us want to be fruitful and productive. We want to be the person that God created us to be.

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That can only happen as we allow God to deal with the issues that hold us back and keep us from becoming that person. Sometimes we say things like, “There has got to be an easier way, a short cut, maybe even a Holy Spirit zap!” Allowing God to do His work in our lives requires openness and vulnerability. For most of us that is not easy. No one wants the junk of their life exposed. No one wants others to see the ugly sticks and thorns.

Sometimes the desire to look good in the moment comes at the expense of health and greater fruitfulness. For that reason, pruning is not optional. A rosebush must be planted in the right spot and nourished properly in order to grow. Pruning will allow the rosebush to continue producing healthy beautiful roses.

### II. It is the work of the Father:

**I am not qualified to prune you and you are not qualified to prune me. That's Gods job!**

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Darrel was radical when he got those pruning shears in his hands. He was like a man on a mission or, possibly, a man possessed. As I stood there too shocked and angry to speak, I began to realize that as much as I disliked what was happening, he knew what he was doing. He had an objective in mind and understood the potential of what the rosebush could become.

Through this experience, I found that we are not always qualified to deal with the deepest issues in our own lives. While it is common to get caught up in what others might think or how things look, emotional and spiritual health is always the most important. In the parable, Jesus explains the Father's role in tending the vines: "I am the vine and my Father is the gardener." God knows when to be gentle and when to be radical. God is the expert.

It is also important to understand that we are not qualified to prune others. When dealing with our own issues, our tendency is to take it slow and be



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very gentle. When dealing with others, many unintentionally go for the throat. Even when we can easily see areas in each other's lives that should be pruned, that does not qualify us to do it.

Tragically, the world is full of people that have been misunderstood, judged, and crushed by those who took it upon themselves to be God's pruning shears. Even with the best intentions, experience, and maturity, we are not in a position to correct problems in one another. However, that doesn't mean we should never speak up. There is a time to share concern, confront wrong, and take a stand. How do we know when to share concern and confront someone we care about?

Questions to ask yourself before sharing concern and confronting others:

Does the level of my relationship with this person give me a place to speak into the situation? To speak into their life from a perspective of care and rela-

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tionship is always the most effective way when confronting them.

What is the motive? There is a fine line between genuine concern and a sense of obligation, self-righteousness, or judgment.

Have I prayed and listened to the heart of God? Overreacting and making premature assumptions often causes unnecessary hurt and damage.

How can I best communicate genuine concern? Remember, sharing concern and confronting someone you care about should always be for their benefit and not your own.

Is my approach respectful and honoring? People are more open and receptive when they are approached with humility.

Once you have expressed your concern, leave it with them. It is not your responsibility to control their response, or to make sure that they deal with

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the issue. That is the work of God and the Holy Spirit. Pruning is about growth and productivity. It is about bringing out the best and removing the things that diminish and destroy. I thought Darrel was too radical when he pruned the rosebush, but he knew exactly what he was doing. God knows when to prune each of us and exactly how to do it. Leave pruning to the expert.

### III. It is not always recognized:

**Often it feels like a trial or even a spiritual attack. Wouldn't it be great if God gave us advanced notice? But He doesn't.**

Spiritual pruning can be confusing and uncertain. Recognizing where it is coming from and why it is happening is difficult. Sometimes I think it would be great if God gave us an advanced notice: "Dan, I am getting ready to prune you!" Of course, God is not required to give any notice or ask our permission.

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Over the years, I have noticed that God uses difficult circumstances and even hellish situations to bring out the best in us and accomplish His purpose. There is an incredibly powerful story in Matthew 14:22-36. The disciples are in the middle of the Sea of Galilee at about three or four o'clock in the morning. It was extremely dark and stormy, the wind was stiff and the sea was rough. The disciples had rowed their boat all night making little to no headway. They were exhausted and afraid as the storm continued to rage.

It was Jesus that had sent them across the lake after a long day of ministry and now they were caught in the storm. Suddenly Jesus shows up, walking on the water, and everything changes. At first, they thought it was a ghost. I think that's exactly what I would have thought. Keep in mind, this was not an everyday kind of experience and they were already feeling terrified and alone. Now imagine feeling like you're hallucinating and seeing ghosts. Scary!

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My favorite part of the story is when Jesus realizes they don't recognize him and sees how terrified they are. He says to the disciples, "Take courage! It's me, don't be afraid." Peter quickly responds, "If it's you, Jesus, tell me to come to you on the water." That's crazy! I always wonder why anyone would say that. I probably would have told Jesus to come over to us, but it was Peter talking, and most of the time Peter was an impulsive, big-mouthed kind of guy.

When Jesus responds, "It's me!" Peter, without hesitation, jumps off the boat and starts walking on the Sea of Galilee. When he realizes that he is actually walking on water, he panics and loses focus. In that moment, Peter's circumstances became bigger than God. He began to sink until Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. Jesus then asks, "Peter, why did you doubt?"

There is so much in this story that speaks to us. How often do we allow circumstances to govern our lives? We can easily become trapped in what

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is happening around us, failing to realize that God is much bigger than our life circumstances. God uses our circumstances to accomplish His purpose in us. However, we are never the victim of circumstances unless we allow ourselves to be. Circumstances are often a tool that God uses as pruning shears to remove what is destructive.

As soon as Peter and Jesus climbed into the disciples' boat, the wind died down, the sea calmed, and the storm was over. The purpose of the storm had been accomplished. It is unlikely that the disciples had any idea what was really going on. They were caught in the middle of a storm and needed a way out. God had purpose in allowing the storm. It was a tool that He used to prepare them for the future and shape them into who He created them to be.

When the storm on the Sea of Galilee was most fierce and the disciples were most afraid, Jesus came to them. At the time when they needed Him most, there He was. Like the disciples, we do not

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always recognize spiritual pruning for what it really is. God uses the difficult trials and overwhelming circumstances to prepare us for fulfillment and greater fruitfulness.

### IV. There is always a purpose:

**It is always about health and fruitfulness.**

I remember my friend talking about what he called the three D's of pruning; dead, damaged, and diseased branches. These are the three types of branches that should be completely cut off a rosebush when pruning. Productive branches should be cut back significantly, but not cut off. Restoring and maintaining health is the first priority so that the rosebush will have the best possibility of greater fruitfulness. I have noticed some interesting parallels between the three D's of pruning and the negative influences that affect and often destroy lives.

## A. Dead branches

Dead branches were the first thing my friend cut off the rosebush. I had already cut some of them off, especially the ones in front that were easily seen. Remember, I was more concerned with how the rosebush looked. Dead branches are not very attractive, so I had no problem removing most of them. I did leave the dead branches in back that were not as visible. Like many of the deep issues in our lives, they were much more difficult to get to.

Dead branches significantly affect the health of the entire rosebush and inhibit new growth. Removing them is crucial. Even though they were once thriving and productive, no amount of attention or care can bring them back. Once they are dead, it is time to remove them. Removing dead branches also allows more of the plants energy to flow towards new life and growth.



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I am convinced there is an amazing life lesson here. Are there any dead branches in your life that are ready to be cut off? I look at outdated methods and irrelevant attitudes as dead branches. Continuing to use the same methods, even if they were once successful, is always a trap. There is a tendency to reminisce about how wonderful something once was and a desire to continue doing that same thing over and over. I often see this happen in church. Attaching to fantastic memories and the lessons that have shaped our lives becomes the only method we know. God has many methods. However, God doesn't anoint methods. God anoints people.

Misunderstanding and failure are other dead branches that affect our lives. Failure is a part of life that must be experienced at one point or another. Our failures and mistakes can have such a tremendous impact that we're inclined to dwell on them. The tendency to dwell on mis-

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takes and failures allows them to dictate who we are and how we live. Remember, your past experiences, including mistakes and failures are part of your story; but, they are only part. Embrace them and don't try to run away or deny they happened. They will always be a part of your story. Understanding failure is always a work in progress and that is a part of what makes us all unique.

**Your past is part of your story, but it is only part. Where we have been is not where we are now or what we will become.**

### B. Damaged Branches

After removing the dead branches, my friend turned his attention to the damaged ones. If not properly cared for, damaged branches most often become diseased and will infect the entire rosebush. Damage occurs when branches have

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been abruptly broken off, crushed, or improperly cared for.

Before I tell you an amazing story about a man with a very strange name, let me ask you a question: have you ever struggled with your name and wondered what your parents were thinking when they gave it to you? My middle name is Calvin, and I hated it for years. Growing up, I would never tell anyone my middle name until Calvin Klein became so popular; then Calvin became the coolest name around. Suddenly, I wanted everyone to know it was my middle name. Well, try this one, Mephibosheth! How would you feel if your parents gave you a name like that? Every time I write his name I have to look it up to make sure I'm spelling it right.

If you've never read the story, I encourage you to do so in 2 Samuel 4:4, 9:1-12. When Mephibosheth was five years old, his grandfather, King Saul, and father, Jonathan, were killed in battle

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and the palace was under siege. While fleeing for their lives, the nurse who should have protected Mephibosheth dropped him and he became crippled in both feet. Suddenly, this innocent young boy lost everything from his identity, position as a member of the royal family, to his ability to walk and be independent.

For the next twenty plus years, Mephibosheth lived in exile, facing incredible shame and rejection. When King David remembered that his friend Jonathan had a son, he wanted to find him to reconnect, redeem, and restore him. He knew nothing of Mephibosheth's fate and wondered if he was even still alive. It is one of the most amazing stories in the Bible that clearly reflects God's desire to heal, redeem, and restore.

Mephibosheth was dropped, crippled, full of fear, bitterness, and shame until God showed up with healing and restoration. Like Mephibosheth, many of us have been dropped and

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crippled by the ones who should have protected us: parents, family, society and even the church. We have faced life storms, winds of adversity, been burdened with crushing loads, and damaged by life circumstances.

**God is always greater than our circumstances, and He can take the damaged areas of our lives and use them to shape us into all He has made us to be.**

### C. Diseased Branches

While I was pruning the rosebush, I noticed tiny dark spots on several branches. Most of them were so small that they were almost unnoticeable. I had no idea what they were or if I should even be concerned. I cut the branches back just enough to where I couldn't see any spots. Later, I found out that the spots were one of the most common diseases in rosebushes. If left alone, they could potentially destroy the entire rose-

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bush. My friend carefully examined each branch and made sure that all the disease was completely cut out.

We have all faced painful life experiences, often during childhood or adolescence, a time when it can be difficult to understand how to process them. Because we didn't know what to do with the experience or how to process the emotions, we bury them deep inside. We try to move on hoping they will no longer influence our life. Many of us carry those scars for a lifetime. Tragically, we allow them to shape what we believe about life, ourselves, and even how we see God. Without realizing it, we allow our past to define who we are and even decide our future.

It has been said, "The past should always be a point of reference, not a place of residence." We have all felt hurt, disappointed, betrayed, and misunderstood. These painful life experiences can poison us like the diseased branches in a

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rosebush. If left untreated, disease spreads, beauty dissipates and given enough time, the entire rosebush is destroyed.

My grandmother often talked about what she called “praying through.” It took me a long time to understand what she really meant by that. She always connected it to people coming into relationship with Jesus. She would talk about them spending hours at the church altar crying, confessing, and repenting of sin. It was a time to clear their conscience and let go of any guilt and shame. She understood that opening your life to Jesus does not require convincing God to take us in. God is ready and waiting with open arms.

Praying through means learning to be transparent with God and yourself. It includes forgiving those who have harmed you and letting go of bitterness and resentment. Praying through, as she called it, is much like cutting out the disease from a rosebush. It is all about allowing God to

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come into the broken areas of your life to bring healing. When it came to pruning the diseased branches, my friend was radical. The disease had to be completely removed or the life of the entire rosebush was in jeopardy.

**The past should always be a point of reference, not a place of residence. Don't allow yourself to be defined by past failures and mistakes. Let Jesus define you.**

### D. Productive branches

It isn't hard to understand why you would remove the dead, damaged, and diseased branches from a rosebush. They are unhealthy and will never produce quality fruit or flowers again. Given enough time, the disease will spread throughout the bush and destroy it. What can be really difficult to understand is the necessity of pruning healthy, productive branches.



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Remember what Jesus told his disciples about pruning in John 15:2, “...every branch that bears fruit he prunes so that it will bear more fruit.”

Like most young men and women graduating from college or seminary, I was ready to turn the world upside down. I didn't think I knew everything, but I thought I knew far more than I did. I am thankful for all the people who patiently let me grow up and didn't give up on me while God did some radical pruning in my life.

Bev and I had the privilege of being involved in the early days of ministry at The Church on The Way in Van Nuys, California. It was an incredibly exciting time. There was such a sense of expectancy, you could hardly wait for the next church service. People would actually line up waiting to get in. You always felt spiritually safe, but never knew what would happen next. It was an amazing time! Every Tuesday morning and evening, I led a seminar on the ministry of the

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Holy Spirit. Spiritually hungry people would come from a number of different church backgrounds, eager to experience the touch of the Holy Spirit.

I was also the director of the Los Angeles Teen Challenge during that same time. Teen Challenge is a Christian drug rehabilitation program. As director, I connected with church leaders from all over the city as well as government and civic leaders. It was a time of huge personal fulfillment. So much of what God had put within me was finding its place.

It was an early morning phone call from Pastor Jack Hayford that began the process that changed everything. There was a little green church on Orion Street about five miles from Church on The Way that had only a handful of people left and needed a pastor right away. Jack wanted Bev and me to pray about it, but it was clear he felt that God had told him Bev and I

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were the ones to go there. How do you argue with that one? That was just about the last thing I wanted to hear. I loved what I was doing and really didn't want to make any changes, especially at a little church with only a handful of people. The Church on The Way was booming and Pastor Jack felt confident that the little green church would too.

I'll never forget our first official service as pastors of The Sepulveda Foursquare Church. We wanted to meet with the little group of people that had been part of the church before we began inviting family and friends to join us. We knew it was a little group, what we didn't know was how little! That first welcoming service was Bev and me, no one else, just us! We cried as we welcomed each other and wondered what we had gotten ourselves into, or what Pastor Jack had gotten us into. Over the next few months, some friends from Church on The Way and a few

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family members joined us. But, in reality, little happened.

My discouragement turned into deep depression. What was this all about? What had we done wrong? Was this a total mistake? About two or three years later, I resigned my position as director of Teen Challenge and, about the same time, stopped teaching the Holy Spirit seminar at Church on The Way. The little green church on Orion Street grew a little then declined a little; it was up and down. I became more discouraged and depressed with each passing month. I was confused and didn't understand what happened. Everything seemed to be falling into place, and now it was gone. I was disappointed in myself, in God, and in the ones who got me into this position.

It can be really difficult to understand what's happening when a productive part of your life suddenly dries up. Things have gone really well,

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you're experiencing fulfillment and functioning in an area of gifting. Suddenly, with little or no warning, it all stops!

Why would God stop something that is so good, so productive? Is it possible that He is preparing you for greater productivity? It really is a paradox. The more productive and fruitful we are, the more likely we are to be pruned.

Ministry at The Sepulveda Foursquare Church wasn't working and I didn't see any reason to keep trying, I just wanted out. I decided it was time to resign. I didn't want any advice and I didn't want anyone telling me that I should hang on any longer. I didn't even want to talk to God about it, except to occasionally yell and complain about how unfair this was. You know what I mean, we have all been there. I certainly didn't want to talk to Bev about it because I knew what her response would be and I didn't want to hear it. I quietly wrote my letter of resignation and

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planned to give it to the church elders at our meeting that night.

Because space was extremely limited, the elders met in a small circle at the front of our little church sanctuary. With my letter of resignation in hand, we began the meeting with prayer. As we started to pray, the double doors of the little sanctuary opened, and in walked a big African American man. I had never seen him before. He was not the kind of man you would easily forget. He was built like an American football player but dressed in a light colored, three-pieced suit. Immediately, I stood up to go let him know that this was not a public meeting. I had a strange feeling as I approached him that only increased when he said, "Hi Dan." How did he know my name? I was sure I'd never seen him before.

I asked if we had met and his response only added to the already strange feeling, "Yes, we have, but not quite like this." What kind of an-

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swer was that? Of course, my next question was, "Have we met before?" He quickly responded, "That's not important! What is important now is that I have a message from Father: Don't give up. Don't quit. It's small now, but it will grow!"

I was shocked! I didn't know what to say. Everything in me wanted to reach out and touch him, but I couldn't. "Who are you?" I asked again. He repeated, "Don't give up. Don't quit. It's small now, but it will grow!" By this time, the elders who had only heard part of what he was saying stood up and began to walk towards us.

As they approached, he opened the double doors leading into the lobby area and out the front door he went. We were only a few feet behind him, but as we followed him out the front doors, he was gone. We looked everywhere, there was no way he could have gotten away without us seeing it. We were right there! I have no question in my mind that we encountered an

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angel sent from God to deliver a message to this young pastor who was ready to give it all up and walk out in deep shame and disappointment.

Needless to say, I didn't go ahead with my plan to resign that night. When the shock wore off, I showed the elders my letter and told the story. None of us questioned that we came face to face with an angel that night. When I think back over the years of ministry, I wouldn't change the time we spent at the little green church on Orion Street for anything.

It was there that God did some radical pruning in my life, leaving what seemed like ugly sticks and thorns. What first felt like being sidelined by God, the end of fruitfulness and fulfillment, actually became the tool God used to prepare us for greater fruitfulness. It was the productive areas where God's pruning seemed most radical and difficult to understand. Always remember that God knows exactly what He is doing, and



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the goal of spiritual pruning is health and greater fruitfulness.

I worked so hard to protect the most beautiful productive branches on the rosebush. When my friend began cutting them, everything in me screamed, “Stop! Leave those branches alone! Look how beautiful they are!” In reality, he was preparing the rosebush for greater productivity. He knew what he was doing even though it didn’t make sense to me at the time. The next season proved it, those same branches became even more productive and beautiful than they had ever been.

**What can feel like being sidelined by God can actually be a tool He uses to prepare us for greater fruitfulness.**

V. It gets us back to the source:

**Jesus is our source of life. The closer we are to that source, the more life we experience.**

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Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Jesus is the source of life. The closer we are to that source, the more life and vitality we experience. In that same context, Jesus reminds them, "Apart from me you can do nothing." If the branch is separated from the vine, it dies! It has no ability to sustain itself.

When Jesus spoke those words, Judaism had become much more about religious rules and traditions than relationship with God. Not only were they bound by Old Testament regulations, but they were smothered with rules they themselves added. In an attempt to clearly interpret and fulfill Old Testament requirements, they developed what is known as the oral law, or traditions of the fathers. In time, those traditions became as binding as written law. If I understand it right, there were over 600 rules and regulations. How do you live under that? Every aspect of life was dictated by lifeless rules. Religion in

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any form tends to be rule based, “Do these things to be accepted and approved by God.” Jesus is all about relationship, heart stuff!

I remember the shock that early spring morning when I was heading to the office and saw little green buds all over what had been ugly sticks and thorns. New life had begun to break forth that gave me hope that the rosebush would become beautiful and productive again. Growth and development had been happening beneath the surface during the dormant months, or what I call the ugly sticks and thorns season. It was almost like clockwork, even a little miraculous. Seemingly out of nowhere, a new season had begun.

There’s so much in this story that parallels our life experiences: events that take place, situations we find ourselves in, disappointments, misunderstandings, people who treat us unfairly and at times become hostile towards us, even those days when it seems like everything is going

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wrong. God has an amazing ability to take all of that and use it to bring about really good things in our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote to a young church in Rome living under extreme persecution, facing horrendous challenges and incredibly difficult situations, "...We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28) "...In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:37) God uses the events, both good and bad, as pruning tools. He takes advantage of every experience to do good things in us and prepare us for greater fruitfulness. We all want to be productive, fruitful, and fulfilled, but often fail to realize that pruning is strategic and can be a painful part of that process.

While my friend was radically pruning the rosebush, I thought for sure I heard the bush scream, "No! Stop! What are you doing to me?!" Or the

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one I often use when I don't understand or like what is happening, "I thought you loved me?" I know that sounds crazy and I'm sure the screaming was only in my head. Rosebushes don't scream, do they? When it comes to spiritual pruning, it's painful! When The Father cuts out the dead branches, things we have held onto for so long even though there is no longer life in them, it's painful. When He touches the damaged or diseased areas, with all the issues we have tried to bury or old hurts and wounds that we have never faced or allowed God to heal even though they influence how we live our lives, it hurts. Much of the time, it seems easier to run away from them or bury them a little deeper. At times, facing and dealing with them is the last thing we want to do. Oftentimes, the most painful can be the cutting back of the productive branches: the areas where gifting is developing, fulfillment is experienced, and real life is happening. Suddenly, it's cut back, and that hurts!

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I discovered that often it's at times of spiritual pruning, when The Father is dealing with the deepest issues in our lives, that we are most vulnerable. Spiritual pruning is painful and can be confusing when we don't understand what is actually happening. I remembered something I had read in the pruning book, the one with all the great pictures and diagrams. After you cut each branch, cover it with a drop of glue to ensure recovery and guard against disease and insects. The Father, like the expert gardener, comes to seal off the vulnerable areas with His Spirit and love to ensure recovery, fulfillment and productivity in our lives.

I have two pictures etched deep inside my mind that I'll never forget, even after all the years that have passed since my first pruning experience. The first picture is right after my friend got his hands on those pruning shears and cut my incredible rosebush down to ugly sticks and thorns.

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I'll never forget how painful that was! The other, is the morning I walked out on my front porch and saw the little buds all over the rosebush.

Remember what it's like to feel spring in the air, when new life and hope breaks forth? While rosebushes are not always pruned in the fall, depending on the location and climate, spring always brings new hope. It is a new season that brings new life. Spring always comes! No matter how long and hard the winter, spring always comes.











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## UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULT SEASONS



Dan is an author, pastor, teacher, and international speaker. His passion and purpose is developing others and helping them connect with God's amazing grace. Often referred to as a "courage giver," Dan continues to encourage and challenge others to realize God's love and to become everything God has made them to be. Dan and his wife, Bev, have served as youth pastors, church planters, and lead pastors in several churches. Dan also served as European Coordinator for Foursquare Missions and has traveled extensively, teaching in YWAM discipleship training schools. He serves on the boards of several interdenominational ministries and has pastored various Foursquare churches in the Los Angeles area, where he is based.

EMAIL: [dan@dansneed.com](mailto:dan@dansneed.com)



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