

Pruning That Brings Life

By Erin H. Warren

In January of this year, Central Florida experienced the first hard freeze in over fifteen years, and the aftermath was devastating for our tropical flora. A previous owner of our home had quite the green thumb, and she planted many tropical plants: various palms, rubber trees, an avocado tree, and a gorgeous cluster of pink bougainvilleas. The crown jewel was the massive mango tree, standing over thirty feet. Overnight, the lush green views of our backyard turned to an ugly orange-brown. Death marked our yard.

I quickly learned that you need to resist the temptation to cut it all down. You wait until spring comes, because while it looks dead on the outside, there may still be life inside. So, we waited. For months, we stared at the ugliness of brown, waiting to see if there was still life.

Winter turned to spring, and almost without warning, we started to see life sprout from some of our plants and trees, including our beautiful mango tree. But the damage was extensive and would require a significant amount of work to cut back the mature landscaping. To save money, my husband and I began the long, slow work ourselves, trimming back what was dead until we found signs of life. We dedicated a few hours every Saturday morning to yard work. It was hot. It was hard work. There was so much to do.

I'll admit it was cathartic. It struck me as a picture of our life. We've experienced several painful seasons over the last decade, and with each one, we eventually reached a point where we felt like we could breathe again. But that's when I look up and see the destruction and death that marked that season. When you walk through suffering, inevitably there will be hard work on the other side as you try to find where there is still life.

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

1 Peter 5:10

I've come back to this verse repeatedly over the last ten years. I want restoration that is like Joel 2:25 restoration: I want what was lost given back to me ten-fold. But that isn't always the restoration God gives. In this verse, Peter uses a fascinating word for *restore*. It means "to adjust down to fully functioning." Restoration isn't always additive; sometimes it requires pruning. It requires painstaking effort to remove the gunk that built up over years of hardship.

Here's the truth waiting in the pruning: a plant will try to bring life back to the dead branches. It will waste precious resources trying to revive what cannot be saved. Once you cut off the dead branches, all the resources move toward growing the live branches.

We've worked through the emotional wreckage, the dead dreams, the lost relationships, the scars left by fear. We've tediously and painfully cut back what had died in search of where life was still flowing.

We couldn't save everything, but isn't that just like life too? Right now, our yard doesn't look as full and lush as it once did, but there is still life when I look out our windows. The same goes for you and for me in the hard places. The grace of our God is very present. He is strengthening us, carrying us, confirming us all the while. He is growing us. And one day, we will look back and see the beauty He restored and the life He grew, even amid hard places.