

BROKEN-DOWN HOUSE

Living Productively in a World Gone Bad

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Life in This Broken-Down House

I really did think he had lost his mind. I couldn't believe he was going to do what he was about to do. I tried to reason with him, but he was so excited and engaged, I don't think he heard a word I said.

The day had started out normally. We were with Luella's parents having a leisurely breakfast and discussing whether we wanted to venture out into the Florida sun, when my father-in-law chimed in that he would like to go look at houses. My mother-in-law was not interested at all. The thought of getting out of the car again and again in the blazing sun to tour house after house held no attraction for her. So he extended the invitation to me, and I agreed to go.

He had done his research well and knew of several houses he wanted to see. One particular house was at the top of his list, so we drove to the north side of Miami and into a rundown neighborhood. Already I was thinking, *Why would he want to own a house here?* I hadn't seen anything yet. As we wove our way through the ribbon streets we came upon a lot that could have passed as a bomb site. That's when my father-in-law stopped the car.

The first thing that hit me was the condition of the front yard. The grass was beyond cutting; it needed harvesting. Scattered across this suburban savanna was a random collection of rotting mechanical debris. Old lawnmowers, decrepit appliances, and rusting car parts were strewn everywhere. The house had at one time been painted white, I think. But time, sun, dirt, wind, and neglect had given it a sickly, grayish-yellow skin, mottled and peeling everywhere. The storm door hung at an odd slant, held in place by one rusty hinge.

While I was still trying to take it all in, my father-in-law turned to me and said cheerfully, “Well, this looks promising!” I checked in every direction, trying to identify anything that might fit his description. *Promising? What, exactly, seems promising here?* When he followed up with, “Let’s go in and take a look,” I began to wonder if he was delusional. A strong desire to protect this man from himself rose up in me. It didn’t seem possible that he could be seeing what I was seeing and still use the word *promising*.

We walked up the grease-stained driveway to the tottering front door and my father-in-law gave it a good knock. I half expected the house to collapse in front of us. An older man, as dirty and unkempt as his surroundings, invited us in. I remember thinking he was just the kind of man you would expect to live in such a place.

The inside of the house actually made the outside look pretty good. As I glanced about me, there seemed to be nothing that was clean and whole. Every inch appeared stained and dirty. Every corner seemed filled with junk. Every feature of the house looked to be damaged in some way. It was overwhelming. As we sat on a filthy, sagging couch in the middle of this broken-down house, that puzzling sentence kept echoing through my mind . . . *Well, this looks promising!* Emerging from my daze, I realized my father-in-law had actually begun to negotiate for the house. I wanted to stop him, but I couldn’t. He was too focused and excited.

Within a few days my father-in-law had secured the money to buy the house. Not long afterward, he moved in and began a complete and total restoration. I will never forget walking into that house after all the work had been completed. It was hard to imagine it was the same house.

This Broken-Down World

The world you live in is a lot like that broken-down house. Every single room has been dirtied and damaged by sin. Not one part of it shines with anything like the pure glory that was so evident when it was first made. Sin has left this world in a sorry condition. You see it everywhere you look.

You see it in great cities and small communities. You see it in the environment, blighted by pollution and misuse. You see it in government, often focused more on caring for itself than on serving the people. You see it in entertainment that replaces what is truly beautiful with what is essentially pornography. You see it in the family, as the place designed for growth and protection often becomes a source of life's greatest hurts. You see it in a staggering, diseased economy that has finally exhausted itself after decades of financial debauchery. You see it in art and culture that often debases the very concept of beauty. You see it in history, with instance after instance of man's inhumanity to man. You see it in each life as we all struggle with physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational brokenness every day.

The brokenness around you affects you in different ways at different times. Sometimes you have to deal with personal hurt. Sometimes you grow angry that things do not function as they were designed to. Sometimes you are overwhelmed with feeling sad or lost in the face of this world's pitiful condition. Sometimes you get tired of the effort it takes to live in a broken-down house, and you just want to quit. At every point and every moment, your life is messier and more complicated than it really ought to be because everything is so much more difficult in such a terribly broken world.

But let us also see that this world of ours is *more* than a broken-down house. It is a broken-down house in the process of being restored.

There's a Whole Lot of Restoration Going On

Like my father-in-law examining that ruined little house in Miami, God is not willing for this broken-down world to stay in its sorry condition. As Creator, he is able to look at it and see promise, the promise of a total restoration of its beauty. And he has asked you to move in with him to be one of his tools of restoration.

While it is hard to live in a house that needs to be restored, in some ways it is even harder to live there while the restoration takes place. Not only is everything more difficult in a broken house, there is also the dust and dirt of restoration and the intermittent noise and chaos and sweat and soreness that comes with the repairs. Try as you may to keep the dust sealed off in one room, you find grit in the drawers and on your food. The din of creative destruction wears you down. The labor wears you out.

There are days when you simply don't want to face it. Other days, you forget the mess you're living in for a moment, only to step on a rusty nail or through a rotted step. You often find yourself dreaming of what it would be like to live in a house that needed no restoration, and you wonder if the job will ever be completed. You want to hold on to the promise of everything eventually being fixed, but it's hard. You want to rest, but there's work to do. You want to escape, but you can't—this is your house and you have to live in it. You wonder if what you are seeing is really progress. In fact, it often seems like you're losing ground. The kitchen is more usable than it was, and the pipes from the upstairs bathtub don't drench the living room anymore. But now the staircase has been ripped out and the only way to your bedroom is by a ladder! In light of this mess and all the work yet to be done, it is difficult to

celebrate progress for very long. You have worked hard, but so much restoration is still needed.

This interwoven set of difficulties is the environment you live in every day. It is the only environment you have. It conditions what you face as an individual. It shapes what you experience in your family. It structures the struggles of your marriage and friendships. It creates the stresses of your community. It determines the issues that politicians and government officials must deal with. It molds the work of the church. It affects the condition of the physical environment. It shapes the struggles of your heart and mind. It even determines the things you deal with in your body.

The fact that you live in a broken-down house in the midst of restoration makes everything more difficult. It removes the ease and simplicity of life. It requires you to be more thoughtful, more careful. It requires you to listen and see well. It requires you to look out for difficulty and to be aware of danger. It requires you to contemplate and plan. It requires you to do what you don't really want to do and to accept what you find difficult to accept. You want to simply coast, but you can't. Things are broken and they need to be fixed. There is work to do.

You can tell if a house is being condemned or restored by the size of the tools that are in use. If there's a crane equipped with a wrecking ball out front, you can give up on restoration. But if there are a lot of hand tools around, that's a sign of hope. True restoration takes patience, subtlety, skill, and grace. I live in Philadelphia where a lot of restoration goes on. I once wandered into a row house that was being lovingly restored. In the high-ceilinged living room I found a man on scaffolding removing antique moldings. It was triple-crown molding—three separate moldings fitted together to create a beautiful effect. He wasn't trying to pry off the molding with a big crowbar because he knew that would splinter and break it. He was using a very small hammer to drive very small

wedges between the molding and the wall. It was a tedious job, requiring much patience, but he did it because he had restoration in mind, not destruction. Across the room were three piles of molding he had already removed, every piece perfectly intact. That molding would be refinished and hang on the wall in beauty once again.

Living Productively in a Broken-Down House

So, that's what this book is about. What does it look like on a practical level to live well in a broken-down world that is being restored? What does it look like to live a restoration lifestyle—to live productively in a broken place? What does it look like to function as one of God's tools of restoration?

This book proposes that you have been created and called by God for more than survival. You have been created and called to care for more than just yourself. You have been chosen to be engaged in a process—to care about, to work for, and to embrace the promise and possibility of a restoration lifestyle.

The reason the old man's house had gotten so bad is that he didn't care. He was willing to settle for personal survival. He didn't live with hope or promise. He lived a life of avoidance and daily denial. He wouldn't let himself face how bad it was and how good it could be. He didn't care what the house looked like to his neighbors and he didn't seem to mind that it was getting worse. He gave in as the house gave out, so things just got worse and worse.

But God does care, and he calls you to care. God is not satisfied with the state of this house, and he calls us to share in his holy dissatisfaction. In our hearts he wants dissatisfaction and hope to kiss. He wants us, every day that we live, to embrace the gospel promise of a world made new. He wants our lives to be shaped by uncompromising honesty and undiminished hope. He wants us to face how bad things really are, not as survivalists, but as restorers. He wants to pick us up in his

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hands and use us as the hammers, saws, and screwdrivers of a brand new world. He wants us to believe that because of what he has done there is hope for new beginnings and fresh starts.

Your Lord is the ultimate Restorer, and he never rests. One day his work will be over and the world will be completely renewed. In the meantime, he calls you and me to live in this broken-down house with hearts of patience and eyes of promise. He calls us away from self-focused survival and to the hard work of restoration. He calls us away from paralyzing discouragement and the nagging desire to quit. He welcomes us to live in the patience and grace that only he can give.

God calls us to live productively in a world gone bad. Do you understand what that means?