

Lesson 9

Abiding in Christ through Pruning, Suffering, and Affliction

Leader Guide

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Lesson 9
Matthew 13:3-24
Abiding in Christ through Pruning, Suffering, and Affliction

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. (John 15:2)

Prayers

Introduction

Jesus speaks about the necessity for pruning in the parable of the vine. The vine is especially suited for the image of our relationship with God because the vine has a natural tendency for wild and unproductive growth, much like our own tendency to wander and sin. The vine needs unsparing and unceasing pruning. Like the gardener pruning the vine, God continually draws us back to him through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and sometimes through trials and discipline. We don't like the idea of pruning so much because we equate it to suffering, loss, and hardship, but Jesus said we experience these things so that we will be more fruitful.

Pruning in the parable of the vine and branches is a hard lesson of Jesus, but one that is true in our life experience. I don't know any Christians who have not experienced some loss or suffering. We might face all manner of loss; disease, the death of loved ones, our children suffering or rebelling, senseless violence, broken hopes and aspirations, unemployment, and divorce, to name a few. In these times, God may seem distant and slow to answer our prayers. What does it mean to remain faithful when God seems distant? Suffering is a part of life and spiritual transformation; all suffering changes us for better or worse. Some turn from God in anger and bitterness, but others turn to him and find comfort; they deepen their faith and love for Christ. God is not the author of all trials, but he is the God of all comfort.

In this lesson, we will look at several aspects of suffering and seek to understand God's purpose in allowing hardship.

Parable of the Sower

Mt 13:3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed.

Mt 13:4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Mt 13:5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

Mt 13:6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

Mt 13:7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.

Mt 13:8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Mt 13:9 He who has ears, let him hear."

Mt 13:18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

Mt 13:19 **When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.**

Mt 13:20 **The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.**

Mt 13:21 **But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.**

Mt 13:22 **The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.**

Mt 13:23 **But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."**

1. This parable has three familiar antagonists: Satan, trouble or persecution, and worry about our everyday needs.
 - a. How is the farmer's reckless sowing on the path, in the rocks, and among the thorns, a model of God's grace?

Seeds everywhere; that is how God broadcasts his word of salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ! The gospel message goes out, and many receive it gladly. Unfortunately, some who receive the message of salvation do not continue in their faith, and we have witnessed this too often with friends and family. We also are prone to wander.

- b. Satan is our adversary. We struggle with our sins and temptations, as well as Satan, a spiritual being seeking to destroy us. Have you ever experienced a time when you felt threatened by a demonic force rather than your own temptations?

The thought of Satan has frightened me ever since I saw the movie, *The Exorcist*. The scriptures teach that Satan is a real being seeking to destroy us, so God has given us spiritual weapons to combat him. I have my hands full battling my own temptations.

I don't go looking for Satan in every sin and trial, but I have experienced a vision of a demonic force threatening my life. When I was at the peak of my career, I was working on projects around the world and was traveling a great deal – too much. The children were young, and my wife bore the responsibility of raising them with an absentee father and husband. After several years of the routine, she decided to find solace in affairs with others and filed for divorce. The day the divorce was final, I came home to my apartment, looked in the mirror, and saw a demonic spirit looking back at me. The spirit said, "I've destroyed your marriage; now I'm going to destroy your children." The vision was so frightening, so real. Each year on my performance evaluation, I was encouraged to take a foreign assignment as the next step in a promotion. I refused the assignments each year to stay near my children. Thankfully, the kids are grown and doing fine, upheld by God's faithful, loving protection.

- c. What does hardship reveal in the life of a believer? See also Romans 5:3-5.

Ro 5:3 **Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.**

Hardships reveal our spiritual depth and can shape our character to be Christlike and produce spiritual maturity. Most Christians I know say they felt closest to God during times of trials and suffering.

d. How does the sower sow seeds?

God calls believers to bless others with good and charitable works. They bring many others to faith by sharing their faith and understanding of God's love through Christ for them.

All manner of Suffering

Acts 4:32-35 describes a nearly idyllic early church. Believers were of one heart and mind, and people were not in need because as needs arose, believers who owned property would sell it to meet the needs of others. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. Unfortunately, this was not the only story of the early church. There was also the church in Jerusalem. James, Jesus' brother, addressed the Jerusalem church as adulterous (Js 4:4), murderous (Js 5:6) people. He warned them against their cursing others (Js 3:9), envy and selfish ambition (Js 3:14), pride (Js 4:6), slander (Js 4:11), boasting (Js 4:16), and grumbling (Js 5:9). Within the church was poverty, favoritism toward the rich (Js 2:1-4), lawsuits (Js 2:6), rich members exploited the poor by not paying them their wages (Js 2:6, 5:4), fighting, and quarrels (Js 4:1). As this was going inside the church, there was persecution by Jewish leaders outside the church (Acts 8:1), believers were shunned in their community, they faced possible imprisonment (Acts 8:3), and a severe famine devastated the entire eastern Mediterranean region.

Yet, in all this turmoil, the disciples persevered in their faith, and James encouraged them in their trials. Read James 1:2-12 as he encourages the Jerusalem church and discusses the spiritual benefits of their trials.

Jas 1:2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

Jas 1:3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

Jas 1:4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Jas 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

Jas 1:6 But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

Jas 1:12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

2. How did James say believers should face their trials (verses 1:2)?

James said we should consider facing trials pure joy.

3. What benefit is persevering in your faith while under trial (verse 1:3-12)?

Perseverance builds our faith and spiritual maturity by teaching us God is faithful to meet our needs in trials. Eternal life is our reward for remaining faithful to Christ through trials.

4. We often think of trials as testing from God. Based on the introduction of *All manner of Suffering*, what was the primary source of trials in the Jerusalem church?

The Jerusalem church was persecuted by sinful people, both within the church and outside the church. God was not the cause of their persecution or the sin in the sinful people.

5. Our thoughts are continually prone to wander. We are easily distracted by prosperity, security, and comfort, so we do not seek God's kingdom before our own blessings. Martin Luther said the most dangerous time for the church was when there was no trial; "This is the most dangerous trial of all, when there is no trial and everything goes well; for then a man is tempted to forget God, to become too bold and to misuse times of prosperity." Discuss times when you have felt closest to God. Was it in times of comfort or trial?

I have experienced God's grace during both times of peace and trials, but I felt closest to Christ during an illness in New Zealand. Without prior symptoms, my gall bladder died, and gangrene spread through my body. The hospital in Queenstown did not have a surgeon to remove it, so I was put in an ambulance to the regional hospital in Invercargill, two and a half hours away. I felt myself slipping into unconsciousness during the ambulance ride. I've seen Hollywood versions of people's last thoughts with flashbacks of all the wonderful things that have happened in their life. I also experienced flashbacks, but it was of all the sins, bad choices, and people I hurt in my life. There was also the presence of Christ, who reassured me that all had been forgiven and it would be alright; it was the peace that passes all understanding.

6. From Genesis through Revelation, God used famines and natural disasters for his purposes, either for judgment and wrath or as a blessing by shielding His people and moving them to charity. But this does not mean all natural disasters are instruments of God's wrath. During the Jerusalem famine, the Holy Spirit moved a prophet named Agabus to predict the famine so that the disciples were moved to charity. Read Acts 11:27-30 and Romans 8:19-22. How do these accounts help shape your understanding of natural disasters?

Ac 11:27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Ac 11:28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

Ac 11:29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

Ac 11:30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Ro 8:19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.

Ro 8:20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

Ro 8:21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Ro 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

We should not be so quick to judge that all natural disasters are instruments of God's wrath and judgment. All nature was impacted by Adam's sin, just as all people, so nature is no longer ordered and benign. Regardless of our understanding of natural events, we are called to be charitable toward our neighbors impacted by disasters.

Why? Blessing in Affliction

7. Many years ago, I was friends with a successful businessman who faithfully served as an elder in his church. He led his family in nightly devotions at supper and was married to a wonderful and godly woman who left a path of joy and grace wherever she went. She had one flaw, though. Buried deep within her DNA was BRCA1, the cancer gene. She suffered greatly from cancer for two years before her death. At her funeral, my friend said, "God blew it." In his grief, he descended into a kind of adolescent rebellion, ignoring his long-held spiritual values. I moved, and we lost track of each other, but I learned many years later he remarried and found joy in his new wife and their many grandchildren. I often think about his words, "God blew it." There are no explanations as to why loved ones suffer so greatly, when they love our Lord so much. We call out to God for healing and can't help wondering, "Why"?

I do not ask why so much any longer. As my physical strength wanes with age, I more often ask, "What would you have me do now, Lord?" Sometimes God answers "Why;" sometimes it is answered many years later. Sometimes the need for an answer passes away with time. I don't think we will have answers to all the "why's" in our lives, but the scriptures offer comfort and purpose to endure suffering.

Read the following verses and complete the sentence with the purpose of suffering or trial.

1. Grief and trials can refine and strengthen **your faith**.

In this [eternal salvation], you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire —may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

2. Suffering produces **perseverance, character, and hope**.

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:3-5)

3. Trials test your **faith** so that you develop **perseverance and maturity**.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4).

4. Enduring hardship gives us **confidence** in our **sonship** with God.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. (Hebrews 12:7-8)

5. God disciplines for our own good so that we might share in **his holiness** and produce a harvest of **righteousness and peace**.

Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:10-11)

6. Affliction causes us to **pray**.

Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. (Psalm 25:16)

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. (Romans 12:12)

On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. (2 Corinthians 1:10-11)

7. Trouble causes us to look to God for **comfort** so that we learn to **comfort** others in their troubles.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the **God of all comfort**, who **comforts** us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

When I said, "My foot is slipping," your love, O LORD, supported me.

When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul. (Psalm 94:18-19)

8. How have you experienced God's consolation and comfort during trials?

Answers vary.

Suffering for Christ

The prosperity gospel, also known as the health and wealth gospel, is a popular message in some churches today. According to this message, wealth is a sign of God's favor. God rewards increases in faith and prayer with increasing health and wealth. God's primary desire is for people to be prosperous, so God will give you more money if you work hard and give your money to God.

The problem with the prosperity gospel is God promises to meet our needs but never promises a life of riches, comfort, and abundant prosperity. When a person experiences suffering, they might feel God has lied to them or that they are not good enough to warrant his blessing.

Jesus continually warned about the perils of wealth and said, "You cannot serve both God and money," "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," and "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Jesus did not promise his disciples material wealth; he promised them persecution:

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

^{Jn 15:21} They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15:18-21)

9. Not all suffering is suffering for Christ. Suffering for Christ results from actions taken in Christ's name to advance his kingdom. Do you think Jesus' warning of persecution was only for the Apostles, or for all who would follow him? Consider the following verses:

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I [Paul] had, and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1:29-30)

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs —heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:16-17)

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10)

^{2Th 1:4} Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.

^{2Th 1:5} All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering.

Jesus' warning of persecution was for everyone who would follow him. Many believers have suffered for their faith. Let us hope we face persecution with the saints' joy of being found worthy to suffer for Christ.

10. Jesus told his disciples to take up their cross, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Mt 16:24-25). For Jesus, the cross meant doing the Father's will for the salvation of all people, even unto death. What are we willing to surrender to accomplish the Father's will in our life:

- a. Resist sin?

- b. Home life?
- c. Financially?
- d. Service with our time and skills?
- e. For neighbors and others?

Closing Prayer (2 Corinthians 1:3-5)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

Lord, we pray for the courage and strength to be your faithful servants in your kingdom. AMEN