

*Fantasy #5****Pain Always = Judgment and Rejection.***

Are the painful circumstances that we face an expression of God's love or His wrath? It is tempting to feel that if God really cared for us and loved us He would never let us suffer but we know that He also disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12). How are we to know if our hardships are the result of loving discipline or rejection and judgment? John 15 may give us some helpful answers.

Disciples are often tempted to feel God has abandoned them.

The context of the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel is critical to understanding its meaning. The disciples were about to see their Messiah leave. But not only would his departure be confusing to them; it was to challenge their faith to the core. The disciples had been taught that Messiah was not supposed to leave God's people in their trouble but rescue them from it. Jesus departure would be most unexpected, especially in the way it would play out. He was to become a victim of the very injustice he came to judge and remove. Could it be that he was a liar and a fake? All hope in him by the disciples could have seemed misplaced. In this context of confusion, Jesus comes to the disciples with these words of encouragement.

John 15

"1 I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every {branch} that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither {can} you, unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. 8 By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and {so} prove to be My disciples. 9 Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and {that} your joy may be made full. 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are My friends, if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and {that} your fruit should remain,

that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you. 17 This I command you, that you love one another.”

There are three kinds of pain in John 15. First, there is the pain of being cast out and burned because we were not a part of the life-giving vine. Then there is the pain of being pruned by a loving caretaker so that we will become more fruitful. Finally, there is the suffering that comes from living as aliens in a hostile world. In verses 1-17 the pain comes from the loving hand of God the vine dresser who prunes the vine so that it will bear more fruit. In verses 17-25 the pain comes from a hateful world. The purpose of our Lord’s instruction in verses 1-17 is to encourage the twelve to abide in faith and love knowing the temptation to abandoned faith in Jesus and love for each other during times of trauma. There would be a great temptation for the movement, that Jesus had started, to end at the cross with the disciples abandoning faith in Jesus and turning on each other in their disappointment. Jesus was concerned that they not misunderstand, as a sign of rejection and failure, the suffering and pain that they would experience at his crucifixion. We can face the same type of challenge as our world collapses around and on us. How can we know that we are being pruned and not burned?

Four signs of loving discipline

There are four indications that the twelve were not judged by God as failures but rather disciplined by God to bear more fruit. Like the disciples, we can learn from each of these signs as we face circumstances that may feel like judgment more than loving discipline.

Is my life fruitless or am I a fruit-bearer?

The first sign or test of discipline can be seen as the disciples looked back at the last years of their lives with Jesus and ask, **“Did we bear fruit or did we simply tag along without participating in the Kingdom that Messiah brought?”** In verse two above we read, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every {branch} that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit.” Judgement comes to those who do not bear fruit but pruning is a part of a fruitful person’s life. Those who share the life that is in the vine and bears fruit should not conclude that the sense of loss or pain that they experience is the result of God’s rejection but rather is a sign of his loving investment in their success.

It is no secret that there are individuals who have claimed faith in Christ but were never really committed to following him. This was a fact in Jesus day, throughout church history, and it is true today. Just because someone claims to be a Christian does not mean that they are born of God and have true saving faith. One of the tests of true faith is fruit. Now what constitutes fruit? Christians have debated this issue for years. Some define fruit in terms of evangelistic success, the experience of leading others to faith in Christ. Others define fruit in terms of moral character displayed so that all can see good works in one’s life. I define fruit as “spiritual life” displayed through an inner heart that is turned to Jesus and often, but not always, a transformed outer life that others can identify as Christ-like. I am aware that it is possible to be truly born of God and yet not act like Jesus. The church at Corinth in the first century was made up of people in such a state. They were “saints” but were “acting as mere men” to use Paul’s words. I believe that true faith will always bear fruit. But in some cases

the fruit may be (for a time) more inward “of the heart” than outward “in the walk.” The twelve had seen much fruit and were to be encouraged to interpret the pain of the coming cross as an act of divine discipline and not judgement or rejection.

If you are tempted to feel rejected by God because of painful circumstances in your life, you are not alone. Remember that fruit bearing branches may be pruned to bear more fruit by a loving vine-dresser. The pruning may feel like rejection but it is an investment designed to make you even more fruitful. How might God be pruning you through your trial? We may not know the answer to this question until time has passed and we have faced the second question.

Am I bailing out or abiding in faith through the hard times of life?

The second sign or test asks the twelve to look down the road and ask, “**Will we continue to abide and trust God through Jesus no matter how bleak things look?**” Verse 6 of John 15 puts it this way, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” Those who abide or remain in the faith are not cast out. Those who do abide or remain faithful will not be judged but may in fact be pruned. The challenge for the twelve was to remain or abide in faith no matter how difficult it might be to rationally make sense of circumstances that seemed to belie God’s love. The call is to “wait” and let the whole plan be worked out before concluding that God was not there and did not care.

Often I have seen people turn from the way of Christ because of painful, disappointments in life? I remember a successful businessman who seemed to be making great progress in following Jesus after an open confession of faith. When his wife began to experience pain through an arthritic condition, he expected God to heal her. As he prayed she became more debilitated, he turned to any and all means to find a cure or relief for her. As time passed, I could see his hope fade as well as his faith. Today, he does not confess faith in Christ. He is cynical, bitter, disillusioned, and seeking to find his way without faith in Christ. He was not willing to abide or remain with a God who would not remove this painful trial of his life. In many ways I believe the story of the vine and the vine-dresser is designed to prepare the disciples to understand the exodus of Judas. I pray that it is not applicable to us.

Be careful not to bail out of the faith because you can not understand the trial you face. Remember, the disciples could not have seen any good thing coming from a dead Messiah. They were asked to abide through an impossible set of circumstances. With the exception of Judas, they did abide and were surprised by joy.

Am I bitter or am I loving those around me?

A third test would ask the disciples to look at their relationship with each other, “**Do we love each other or are we turning on each other in our confusion and pain?**” Verses ten to twelve indicate that love is an important indication of the kind of fruit that is a sign of spiritual life. “10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments, and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and {that} your joy may be made full. 12 This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” Turning “on” those

around us is sometimes easier than turning “to” those around us when we are under pressure. Jesus seemed to sense this and encourages the twelve to draw together in love. Pain can do some terrible things to us in our relationship with others. If we lose sight of a common enemy against whom we can direct our frustration we may very likely turn on our closest friends and family. The statistics of marriages sticking together with an autistic child is frightening. We were told that nearly 80% of couples with an autistic child will break up. I can now appreciate why after going through the stress of caring for a special needs child. The time demands in caring for such a child rob parents of energy needed to support each other. And that, at a time when each parent needs massive support. The sense of guilt that comes from not being able to care for and cure a special needs child can express itself in anger and frustration with the partner. Add to this the massive adjustment to family dreams, plans, and life style that such a child brings and you have a hostile environment for marriage. Jesus knew that the twelve disciples could very easily turn on each other and lose a wonderful opportunity for his blessing. Jesus knows that we also face the same kind of temptation when pressure is put on our souls, our dreams, and our expectation. It is at times like this that the message of John 15 reads like a light house to a ship tossed at sea.

Am I experiencing God's power through prayer?

There is a fourth sign or test. The twelve were to experience the dynamic of Jesus ministry in and through their own lives as his word was a part of them and as his power was manifest by them through answered prayer. Verse fifteen and sixteen read, “15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and {that} your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give to you.” **An intimate knowledge of the heart of God is seen in answered prayers.**

The mystery of prayer has long troubled me. How can I know what to pray? There are so many requests that seem to go unnoticed by anyone, including God. It is not that I doubt that God can answer. But it is like the child who asks his father to increase his allowance and repeatedly hears, “Not yet.” After 100 such requests it becomes difficult to expect that the answer will change. Yet we know that the father can and may very well grant the request at the 101st asking. I am not going to suggest that we can look at a person's prayer journal and determine whether or not the person praying is a real Christian or not. First, because I am not sure how to identify an answered prayer. After all, the deep longings of our hearts are not always correctly aligned with our conscious needs and requests. For example, I may be praying for an easier set of circumstances in my life thinking that this would leave me happier, more effective, and more secure. Could it be that happiness, effectiveness, and real security have more to do with other factors than more comfortable circumstances? God may answer the longing cry of my heart, not by granting my superficial and misguided request but by touching me in another way altogether. He may be responding to the deepest longing of my heart while flatly ignoring the superficial analysis and request of my mind.

The passage in John 15 suggests that the answered prayer of the disciple is related to the close relationship and intimate knowledge the disciple has with Jesus. The “son” unlike the “slave” knows the master’s mind and heart. The son knows the game plan, he knows the agenda, he knows what to pray for, he knows what to expect. The notion that a person can pray for anything without respect for God’s agenda and expect an answer is not only contrary to Scripture but scary. I believe that a test of one who is under discipline and not judgment will be seen in the degree to which they know the heart and mind of God. This intimate knowledge will be seen in their prayer life – not only the answers to prayer but more importantly the nature of the request.

Am I at odds with the world?

The remainder of John 15 along with the first verses of John 16 remind us that the disciples will be bearing fruit in a hostile environment. For it is in the face of injustice that justice is most dramatic. It is in the face of intolerance that grace is seen most clearly. It is in the face of despair that courage and hope have real meaning. It is in the face of rejection and isolation that love is most meaningful. The rejection and persecution of the world, and in Jesus’ day, the synagogue (16:2), gives unique opportunity for fruitful living. Jesus suffered on the cross so that we would never have to pay for our sins. Jesus suffering in the world however was not so that we would never suffer but to show us how to live in a broken world. His words were, “Follow me” not “watch me as a spectator”. We are promised suffering, if we follow him. We know how to respond because he has shown us.

So as we try to perform an audit on our souls in the midst of suffering, let us be wise and mature “sons” not immature “slaves”. John fifteen is the light that can assist us in our audit. Before we conclude that our suffering is a sign of rejection, we should ask ourselves the questions raised in this chapter through a study of John fifteen. There are, for sure, many times when it is not difficult to see a connection between our suffering and our failures. How are we to respond to those situations when we sense that God has very good reasons to judge us because we have rebelled, failed, and ignored His moral law? The next chapter will address this question.