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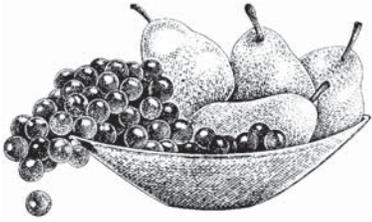
Why
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Gardener's Priority

The Suffering of Job and Spiritual Fruitfulness

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The book of Job tantalizes and frustrates scholars because it probes the most profound questions of life and theology, but then doesn't answer those questions, at least not in a conventional way. You know the story: God allows Satan to inflict horrible suffering on Job, a "perfect" man, but after a time of trial God heals Job and restores his fortunes. *Why?* ask the students of this book. Why would a loving, almighty God allow the devil to torment anyone, let alone a good man like Job? We could understand God letting



Job suffer if the old guy had committed some horrible crime, but God Himself declares Job "blameless and upright" at the beginning of the story (Job 1.8). Job also insists upon his own integrity throughout his time of trial, and at the end of it, even though Job repents (Job 42.6), we are at a loss to understand what it is he repents of. Then, at the conclusion of the story, God justifies Job again when He rebukes Eliphaz the Temanite saying, "I am angry with you and your two friends, *because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has*" (42.7). So *why* would God allow the devil to kill Job's children, alienate Job's wife and cover Job's body with boils? We know there is evil and injustice in the world, but hasn't God promised to protect His

people? If God would allow Satan to afflict a “perfect” man, where does that leave us? This book seems to hold some important secrets about suffering, but what are they? What is really going on in this story?

The Counter-intuitive Truth

The main point of the book of Job seems almost obvious to me now, but it's taken 29 years and a lot of hard knocks for the light to snap on. I can see why secular scholars continue to puzzle over the message of the book. “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2.14). It turns out that the message of Job is not so difficult to understand—it's just hard to accept. What is that message? The Lord Jesus spelled it out in John 15.

While not explicitly alluding to Job, Jesus nevertheless summed up Job's story in the final clause of John 15.2. Let's look at a portion of this teaching of the Lord's:

John 15.1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

John 15.2 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 15.5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing....

John 15.8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

To teach about spiritual fruitfulness, Jesus used the metaphor of pruning. The first clause of John 15.2 is severe, but we suppose it's reasonable: religious people who are phonies, who don't really have the life of Christ in themselves and who show no fruit of the Spirit in their lives will in the end be cut off from any relationship with Him. The second clause of the verse just doesn't sound right though! Why amputate fruitful branches? When something is working well, doesn't it make sense to leave it well enough alone? Yes, in many areas of life, but not in gardening and not in our service to God. When it comes to our spiritual lives, God's response to our fruitfulness is counterintuitive to our natural way of thinking. We would like to think that when Job prospered as a “blameless and upright” man, God would respond by patting Job on the back and saying, “Well done, just keep doing what you're doing.” Instead, God saw fit to lop off Job's children, possessions, health and reputation so that Job would become even more fruitful in his love for God and in his witness to his neighbors. **God's priority for Job was not greater comfort, but greater fruitfulness** — and He has the same priority for us.

The Fine Print Of The Gospel

God's priority of fruitfulness over comfort is like the fine print that we rarely read in our gospel proclamations. We preach that “God has a wonderful plan for your life,” and that's true, but we rarely explain how the “wonderful plan” involves pruning, breaking and dying. Jesus, on the other hand, was straightforward with His disciples about the spiritual process illustrated by these three metaphors. “Every branch that does bear fruit [my Father] prunes,” Jesus said. “Everyone who falls on that stone [i.e., the Messiah] will be broken to pieces,” He taught in Luke 20.18. “Whoever loses his life for me will save it,” Jesus declared on another occasion (Luke 9.24). We don't usually emphasize these promises in our altar calls, but just as surely as God fulfilled them in Job's life and in the lives of the apostles, He will fulfill them in any true child of His.

What do these promises mean, practically speaking? Well, most of us understand what pruning is all about. Parts of a vine or fruit tree that would tend to drain nutrients away from the fruit are lopped off. Careful pruning allows greater energy to go into producing the fruit. When we first come to Christ, we all have possessions and priorities that unnecessarily drain energy away from spiritual fruitfulness as they distract us from the work of the Kingdom. In

time, by inner conviction or by external pressure, God will prune those possessions and priorities from our lives.

What about the being “broken to pieces”—what’s that all about? Jesus was actually enunciating the same pruning principle, but taking it a little deeper, and in this case declaring it to people that were actively resisting Him. The context of this teaching was the parable of the wicked tenants (Luke 20.9-16). The point of the parable was to warn the Israelite religious establishment that they were about to reject the Messiah, and as a consequence lose their favored position in the land as they came under God’s judgment. “When the people heard this, they said, ‘May this never be!’” (Luke 20.16). So, “Jesus looked directly at them and asked, ‘Then what is the meaning of that which is written: “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone”?’” (v. 17). Jesus explained—for those who had the ears to hear—that it was inevitable according to the Scriptures that many would reject the very most important stone in God’s building. That stone was the Messiah, whom Isaiah prophesied would be “a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (Isaiah 8.14). It was then that Jesus stated the principle in Luke 20.18:

Everyone who falls on that stone
will be broken to pieces,
but he on whom it falls will be crushed.

The underlying structure of the Greek text for this statement is exactly the same as that of Christ’s saying in Luke 9.24:

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it,
but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

The comparison of these two passages is helpful. Notice that at first glance the passage about the stone appears to offer two bad options: being broken or being crushed. Both these options are painful, but I don’t think they are both bad. The similar passage about saving one’s life or losing it alerts us that Jesus is probably presenting both a bad option and a good option in His proverb-like saying about the stone. What then does it mean? Well, it’s clear that the second option in this saying is the bad one: “he on whom it falls will be crushed.” According to the prophet Daniel, the Messianic stone or rock is destined to become a mountain that fills the whole land (Dan. 2.34,35). One does not want to be crushed by it. The one crushed by this Stone will not be able to crawl out from under, will never stand again, will never recover, but will become like chaff that the wind sweeps away without leaving a trace. On the other hand, as unpleasant as it is to be broken to pieces, the one who falls upon the Stone does have hope of recovery. The picture presented by the saying is of a person stumbling over the large stone and falling upon it. The metaphor describes people stumbling ideologically over the character and mission of Jesus. There may be things we don’t like about Jesus, but those things are nonetheless as solid as rock; they are not going to change. Rather than the rock conforming to our wishes, we will sooner or later be conformed to its contours as the shape of our character and priorities is broken to pieces against it. However, this kind of stumbling and breaking need not be fatal for the individual, even as it will not prove fatal for the nation of Israel. “Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?” Paul asks about his people in Romans 11.11. “Not at all!” he answers. God has a redemptive purpose in the breaking of Israel and He has a redemptive purpose in the breaking of individual believers. All of us, believers and unbelievers, stumble sooner or later over the profound holiness of Jesus. To the degree that any of us embrace the breaking process as we stumble, we will discover that God delights in a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51.17) and comforts us in *His* embrace. Thus, while the person on whom the Stone falls is lost, the person who falls upon the Stone may find redemption in the very process of being broken to pieces and conformed to the contours of the Stone.

The thing that I most dislike about the principle of being “broken to pieces” is the “to pieces” part. It’s hard enough to be broken one time or in one place (say a

ingernail), but to be broken to pieces describes the thoroughness of God's redemptive restructuring of our character. That's why the third metaphorical saying about losing one's *life* fits in this same vein of Christ's teaching. It is not enough in God's eyes that *some* wasteful branches be pruned off or that *some* unholy attitudes be broken. He intends to do away with *all* the dross of the old life so that only the gold remains. It is *all* the fleshly life, *every* unheavenly aspect of our life that must be dispensed with. In short, the old self-centered, self-indulgent, temporal and earthly minded me must die. It will be a thorough pruning and a thorough breaking. Why? Because, as Job discovered, God's priority for us is *fruitfulness*.

But must we really *die* to be fruitful? If we believe the teaching of Jesus, the answer is yes. "I tell you the truth," He said in John 12.24, "unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." It's easy to read this passage in its context and take it as only biographical, in other words, as Jesus talking about Himself and His crucifixion. Jesus certainly fulfilled these words about dying and producing many seeds, but He did not state them biographically. In other places He made plain biographical predictions:

We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life! (Matt. 20.18,19)

In John 12.24, on the other hand, Jesus states a principle that applies to all: *unless* a person dies he will remain unfruitful, but if he dies he will bear much fruit.

The Promise

This is what the story of Job is about. While the book of Job is a treasure-trove of insights on various subjects, its overarching theme is the redemptive work of God in pruning, breaking and *killing* a good man to make him even more fruitful. No wonder it's difficult for us to understand what Job is repenting of at the end of the story. He isn't repenting of any sin specifically but of his fleshliness in general, the self-absorption he now sees so profoundly in the light of God's holy presence. The only answer God gives to all Job's questions is a fresh vision of Himself, and that is all the answer Job needs. He sees the Rock with his own eyes (Job 42.5,6) and becomes overwhelmingly aware of how out of plumb his character is with the contours of that Stone. Job sees why the dismantling work was necessary in his life and repents of having resisted it.

God's priority for Job and for us is fruitfulness. I'm sorry I did not really understand this earlier in my life. I'm sorry I did not teach it more clearly to my children. I fear that many of us have encouraged our children to adopt a different priority than fruitfulness for the divine Gardener. So often we've told them, "I just want you to be happy," or "I just want you to be safe," or "I just want you to receive Jesus as your Savior and go to heaven." As sensible as these parental pleas sound, they can encourage a self-centered worldview, and make our children vulnerable to all the worldly temptations that promise happiness *now*, safety *now* and heaven *now*. I've come to realize that these parental desires for my children spring so readily to my mind because they reflect my own selfish inclinations toward personal peace and comfort. I see now that these desires are a far cry from the call to fall to the ground and die. They are the very desires that are slowly being broken to pieces on the Stone.

As hard as this teaching is, it has helped me through some painful times of dismantling in my own life. Just the knowledge that such a dismantling is normal to the Christian life is a great comfort as it helps us realize that we are not being abandoned or punished by God when trials come. Furthermore, the promise taught hand in hand with the *priority* of fruitfulness brings great encouragement (John 15.2). The older we get, the more we want our life to count for something. The *promise* of fruitfulness makes the pruning, breaking and dying worth it all.