



The Master Gardener

*Grafting, Cultivating, Pruning,
Guarding, Harvesting,
Pitting, Crushing and Redeeming!*

The olive tree is wild by nature. In order for it to bear healthy fruit, it must first be grafted onto a cultivated olive tree. It is the same with our children. Our olive shoots are wild by nature, in need of being grafted into the family of God. Much time and prayer stands between the graft and the harvest of healthy fruit. In the interim, essential pruning must be done by the Holy Spirit, including the severing of dead wood that He deems useless, unsightly and burdensome. A healthy olive tree can withstand radical pruning to enhance future fruit production. Pruning helps to open the tree to the sunlight



(Sonlight!). Trust the *Master Gardener* as He shapes your olive trees into His perfect image and likeness.

While in Turkey, I learned that the best olive crop is one that is hand-picked, rather than one collected in nets as the fruit drops in fall and early winter. As I observed men and women patiently harvesting the fruit, I was reminded of how diligently God labors over His children, choosing and positioning them where they will best reach their full potential in Him. When David compared himself to a flourishing olive tree, he was announcing to the world that he had willingly submitted himself to the expert cultivation by God. Thus the young, hand-picked shepherd flourished into a tree of righteousness!

*But as for me, I am like a green
olive tree in the house of God;
I trust in the loving kindness of God
for ever and ever (Ps 52:8).*

As co-laborers with God in the parenting process, prepare the soil of your children's hearts to receive the precious seed of His Word. As your young olive plants mature in Christ, encourage them through prayer and instruction to uproot the persistent weeds of sin that inhibit healthy, positive growth. Nurture the healthy seeds developing within their spirits through constant intercession and guard them jealously from the wiles of the enemy. Pray that when

the harvest finally comes, their fruit will be mature, beautiful, bountiful, and unblemished—ready for the King’s table.

The Mystery of the Olive Tree— Israel and the Church Grafted Together

God continues to work tirelessly and faithfully in the lives of His people, including both the nation of Israel and His Church (all believers). His continued labor is necessary because sin, at times, has caused both branches of believers to lose their fruit-bearing potential, prompting the *Master Gardener* to deal severely with His children. The following verse from Jeremiah 2:21 reminds us how the tender olive shoots of Israel became wild and uncultivated, much like Christ’s end-time church as it conforms itself more and more to the standards of the world, rather than to the holiness of God’s Word. I have included three versions of the verse to emphasize the intensely strong words used by the translators to describe God’s apostate people.

*Yet I planted you a choice vine,
A completely faithful seed.
How then have you turned yourself
before Me Into the degenerate shoots
of a foreign vine? (NASB)*

*I had planted you like a choice vine of sound
and reliable stock. How then did you turn
against me into a corrupt wild vine? (NIV)*

*Yet I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right
seed: How then art thou turned into the degenerate
plant of a strange vine unto me? (KJV)*

Foreign, corrupt, strange, degenerate! These words reveal insight into the heart of God at this point in Jewish history. He was more than disappointed with His unfaithful olive shoots. He was deeply grieved to the point of executing judgment! The Hebrew word for *degenerate* is *nokri*, meaning *strange, alien, foreign, outlandish*.¹ In this verse, God foretold the soon-to-be-exiled Jews that their degenerate lifestyle made them aliens in His sight. From this time forward, He regarded them as foreigners.

The literal meaning of *nokri* in the modern Hebrew tongue is *Gentile*, meaning a *non-Jew*. God’s chosen people had become worse sinners than their heathen neighbors. In the following verse, Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, describes the branches of ancient Israel as worthless:

*The Lord called your name,
“A green olive tree, beautiful in fruit and
form”; With the noise of a great tumult
He has kindled fire on it, And
its branches are worthless (Jer 11:16).*

Even God lost His fruitful olive tree for a season when He allowed it to be consumed by the fires of judgment. The remarkable ability of the olive tree to regenerate after experiencing fire, flood, and drought, however, presents beautiful, prophetic imagery for the physical and spiritual restoration of God’s wayward children. Israel was reborn as a nation on May 14, 1948. Her spiritual rebirth will be fulfilled during the Great Tribulation.

The Great Grafting

By the grace of God, there is room on the olive tree for the Gentile branches to be grafted in, as well as for the re-grafted branches of the Jews. The following passage speaks of the coming restoration of the remnant of Israel who will one day choose Christ as Lord and Savior. What a great day it will

be when the once wild Gentile *olive branches* and the re-grafted *branches* of Israel become one with the *root* of the olive tree, Jesus Christ—the *Master Gardener*.

But if some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted, but they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in His kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, His natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree
(Ro 11:17-24 NIV).

The apostle Paul informs the Gentile believers that being grafted onto the olive tree is contrary to human nature and should not become a matter of spiritual pride. After all, the olive tree represents the privileged nation of Israel, to whom the veiled revelation of salvation was initially given through the early patriarchs of the faith. Paul then informs his readers that the divine plan of God, previously hidden, was now gloriously revealed to both Jews and Gentiles:

*For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:
"The deliverer will come from Zion;
He will turn godlessness away from Jacob,
And this is my covenant with them
When I take away their sins
(Ro 11:25-27 NIV)."*

Paul uses the Greek word *mysterion* (μυστήριον), meaning *mystery*, to explain a concept in terms that were very familiar to the former pagans. The word comes from the Greek verb *mueo* (μυέω), meaning *to initiate into the mysteries*. The ancient cults of the day, known as mystery religions, involved the practice of mystical rites performed to gain secret knowledge from the deities, knowledge that remained hidden from the uninformed.² The mysteries of which Paul speaks refer to the divine revelation from God. The gospel stands in sharp contrast to the demonic knowledge of the secret, mystery religions of the ancient world. There is nothing concealed in Christ.

Unlike the pagans of Paul's day (and our day as well), who were doomed to spiritual ignorance for their lack of knowledge and desire for truth, the children of God are witnesses to unveiled truth, the reality of a loving Savior who is no longer hidden from the masses. The New Testament writer Luke, a Gentile, records in his gospel the words of the godly Simeon who witnessed the revelation of the infant Jesus, the promised Messiah for all mankind. The same words were first spoken by the prophet Isaiah 690 years prior to the birth of Christ:

*For my eyes have seen Your salvation,
Which You have prepared in the
presence of all peoples,
A Light of revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of Your people Israel
(Luke 2:30-32).*

The word *revelation* in this verse is significant to this study. It is derived from the Greek noun *apokalupsis* (ἀποκάλυψις) meaning *an unveiling, an uncovering, a revelation*. It is the title of the last book of the Bible, *Apocalypse*, or *Revelation*—meaning *an unveiling, a revelation of Jesus Christ, the pre-eminent One who is now in our midst*. Because Jesus has been revealed to the Gentile world, true Christians and faithful, redeemed Jews will be one with Him, the *root* of the eternal olive tree.

Because Israel is the *apple of God's eye*, we should teach our children to love and appreciate the land of the Bible and its people. God promised the great patriarch Abraham that He will bless those who bless Israel, and curse those who curse Israel (Gen. 12:3). We bless Israel by praying daily for the peace of Jerusalem as mandated by Scripture. It is the work of the *Master Gardener* to graft, cultivate, prune, guard and crush, but it is the responsibility and privilege of His children to bring in the sheaves through testimony and prayer!

The psalmist speaks of the great joy of the harvest. The following Bible versions express the exuberance of that coming day with singing and joyful shouting. Hallelujah!

*Those who sow in tears will reap with
songs of joy. He who goes out weeping,
carrying seed to sow, will return with songs
of joy, carrying sheaves with him
(Ps 126: 5-6 NIV).*

*Those who sow in tears will reap
with joyful shouting.
He who goes to and fro weeping,
carrying his bag of seed,
Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him
(Ps 126: 5-6 NASB).*

It's "the Pits!"

Even though pruning and cultivating tend to stress the olive tree, the end purpose of increased fruitfulness makes the tedious process worthwhile and essential. When the *Master Gardener* severs the excesses from our lives, we tend to think life is *the pits*, but even the pit experiences can serve a great purpose when they have been ordained by God!

Have you ever wondered what happens to all those olive pits once they have been released from their flesh? You may be surprised to learn that the redeemable pits still have great worth. After being dried in the sun, they are drilled and polished for use as costume jewelry, construction materials, fire logs, bricks and charcoal and as a fuel source for a type of pellet stove. Specialty bars of pure olive oil soap manufactured in the Mediterranean region contain crushed olive pits, which act not only as a cleanser, but also as an exfoliant. The deep cleansing action leaves the skin feeling as soft as satin.

Where some see trash, others envision economic opportunity! It is simply a matter of perspective. Just as nothing from the olive tree is wasted, God allows nothing to be squandered in the lives of His olive shoots. He envisions potential beauty and purpose in what we might consider worthless waste.

Even though the olive pits are useful, they are not redeemable until after the olive has been crushed and the oil released. This reminds us that even in suffering there are blessings. Olive pits demonstrate how the seemingly worthless aspects of our lives are too valuable to cast off. That which appears to be rubbish may have a holy, redeemable purpose in God's kingdom, even if we fail to recognize its potential value.

You can teach your olive shoots to be instruments of healing, cleansing and new growth in spite of adverse circumstances, provided you stay connected to the *root* of the tree, Jesus Christ.

Encourage your children to be hopeful and useful even during the most trying seasons of life. God is glorified in the weaknesses and trials of His children when all trust is placed in Him. The great Redeemer promises to make all things new in His time.

From a Pit to a Palace

Do you sometimes feel that unceasing trials and tribulations have robbed you of the joy of the Lord? Most of us, if honest, will admit to having days and even seasons of discouragement, particularly if our children are struggling with life's challenges and temptations. In the midst of suffering, it is easy to think life is *the pits*. It is important to realize, however, that not all hardships are demonic attacks.

Some adversities may be God-ordained, endurance tests intended to strengthen the inner man. Like the baby chick cracking through the confinement of its prison-like shell, or the emerging butterfly determined to escape the darkness of its bondage, God's children grow stronger during the struggles of life. You can rejoice in the midst of despair because God promises to use even the negative circumstances in the believer's life for a holy, redeemable purpose.

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose
(Rom. 8:28 KJV).

This faith-building verse spoken by the apostle Paul is spiritual glue for the Christian who may feel his life is falling apart. God mercifully placed it in His Word to carry His chosen ones through adversity. The Bible portrays many examples of God-like character traits that were developed in situations we might describe as *the pits*.

Joseph, the dreamer, never read Romans 8:28, but he certainly witnessed the power of its promise. The youngest of twelve sons, Joseph suffered his own literal pit experience at the hands of

his jealous brothers who cast him into a cistern, and later sold him as a slave to a band of Ishmaelite traders. Upon his arrival in Egypt, Joseph was sold to Potiphar, captain of the Egyptian guard. Because of the false accusations of Potiphar's wife, whose seductive advances he virtuously spurned, Joseph found himself in the royal prison where he was punished for many years in spite of his innocence.

Regardless of the dismal circumstances in which Joseph found himself, all was not lost. While incarcerated, the young champion of righteousness learned compassion, humility and responsibility, all qualities he would eventually need to preserve the descendants of Jacob from the perils of destruction. From behind prison doors, the favored son of Jacob interpreted the mysterious dream that prophesied eventual famine to Pharaoh's kingdom. The God-inspired interpretation became his instant ticket to freedom!

Joseph's trials and subsequent prophecy brought him from a pit—to a prison—to a palace! There was no short-cut to his exaltation. Every trial along the way was essential in equipping him for the most powerful leadership role in the kingdom. It was to Joseph, not Pharaoh, that God bestowed great wisdom and administrative ability to oversee the largest food conservation and distribution program that the world had ever known.

Joseph's economic expertise was not learned from the intellectuals of the day. During thirteen years of enslavement and imprisonment, Joseph was taught by God the skills he would need to govern Egypt in the following years. Through his obedient servitude, the embryonic nation of Israel was saved, and the Messianic lineage was preserved for time and eternity. Joseph's time was well invested! Are you willing to serve time in your God-ordained pit of preparation? (For the full account of the life of Joseph and his brothers, read Genesis 37-47.)

From the wise words of E. Preston Eby in His "Kingdom Bible Studies," we read the following words:

One comes to glory through shame. Joseph became a mighty prince of Egypt, but do consider the pathway that brought him there: down into the pit, down into slavery, down into the dungeon. He was on his way up; but the way up was down! Oh, that the saints of God in this hour might come to recognition and understanding of the ways of God!³

If you or your olive plants find yourselves prisoners in a *pit* of despair, become instead *prisoners* of hope:

Return to your fortress, O prisoners of hope; even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you (Zec 9:12 NIV).

Do not underestimate the purpose of God in the trials He ordains for your life. Encourage yourself in the Lord daily, and discover your divinely appointed destiny. Do not wallow in self-pity! Remember how the olive pit must be dried, drilled, polished or crushed in order to become useful. Preparation for service in God's heavenly kingdom is time-consuming, arduous and even painful. If you are in the *pit of despair* right now, do not fret. A day of deliverance is coming for you and your olive shoots. The King of Kings specializes in delivering prisoners from the *pit* to the *palace*. What a redeemer!

Listen to the humble words of the apostle Paul, who like the honorable, faithful Joseph, had his share of prison and pit experiences:

And He (Jesus) has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake;

*for when I am weak, then I am strong
(2 Cor 12:9-10).*

Allow the *Master Gardener* to use you as He pleases—pits and all!

Notes:

[1] Strongs, James Dr., *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984).

[2] "Those who were initiated into these 'mysteries' became possessors of certain knowledge, which was not imparted to the uninitiated, and were called 'the perfected.'"

(W. E. Vines, M.A., *Vines Expository Dictionary of the New Testament* (Nashville, Tennessee, Royal Publishers, Inc., n.d.)

[3] E. Preston Eby, *Kingdom Bible Studies* (El Paso, Texas, unpublished work, n.d.).