

God Is Pruning Us in This Pandemic

Have you ever imagined the year 2020 was just a bad dream? I've had that fantasy many times since the coronavirus pandemic started six months ago. But I always wake up and realize this nightmare is real.

Life hasn't been easy. Some of us got infected with COVID-19, or we know people who were sick or even died. People with loved ones in nursing homes haven't been able to visit in months. Many of us lost jobs, or experienced a serious drop in income. Families have had to deal with closed schools and shuttered businesses. Meanwhile the U.S. economy shrank 32.9% in the second quarter of 2020—the sharpest economic contraction in modern American history.

The impact the pandemic has had on churches has been devastating. After weeks of virtual meetings, churches that now are meeting in person have learned that many of their members are too afraid to be around people or they've grown too accustomed to watching church in their pajamas at home. Church budgets have been slashed, staff positions have been eliminated, and pastors are wondering if having even 50% of their previous members is the new normal.

We've been challenged. We've been hit with overwhelming discouragement. We've been stretched to a breaking point.

Yet those of us who love Jesus know we can't despair. The pandemic didn't take Him by surprise. He not only has promised to be with us during our worst trials, but He promises to use this crisis for our good.

When my ministry travel schedule was canceled in mid-March, and I had no idea where I would get my income, the Lord took me to John 15 and underscored these words from verse 2: "Every

branch in Me that bears no fruit, He takes away. And every branch that bears fruit, He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

Jesus was sharing an uncomfortable truth in this verse. If we want to grow spiritually, and if we want more spiritual fruit, we must submit to the Father’s plan, not ours. He has to cut things away so new growth will appear. He might even need to prune things we cling to. We can’t just skate along in comfort, always getting what we want. If we desire the fruit of a mature Christian life, we must welcome adversity.

British preacher Charles Spurgeon, when preaching about John 15, said: “All fruit-bearing saints must feel the knife.”

I don’t like the knife! Pruning is an ugly, painful and embarrassing experience. If you’ve ever seen a row of pruned trees, you know what I mean. Grapevines that have been pruned are cut back so drastically they look dead. Are you willing to live the pruned life?

Pruning cuts off what is ineffective. This pandemic has been painful, but when we look back in a year we’ll realize that God used it to eliminate things in our lives that weren’t working. Some churches, for example, are realizing they were pouring tons of financial resources into programs or buildings that had no spiritual impact. Pruning has revealed what is essential for us to make a powerful, book of Acts-style impact on our communities.

Pruning brings new life and more fruit. A tree that has never been pruned looks good. But unless the dead wood is cut away along with the showy leaves, we will never see new blooms. We need the knife. The church will not look the same in 2021. Right now we are an ugly sight, stripped of our big audiences, our celebrity preachers and our cool worship bands. We have been reduced to basics. But with the cutting comes something fresh and powerful, something that is so much better than

church as we knew it prior to the pandemic.

Pruning draws us closer to Jesus. More than anything, the knife brings us into a deeper connection with Jesus, the “true vine” (John 15:1). He promises that those who submit to His pruning process will abide closely with Him. Isn’t this what we want? We cannot abide in Him if a thousand other things are distracting us. Life prior to this pandemic was too busy and too cluttered. Jesus wants our focus to be on Him. The process of pruning cuts away everything else so we can love Him and trust Him fully.

If you are willing to embrace God’s knife of pruning, pray with me: “Lord, I choose to rejoice in the midst of this difficult season. I know You can cause all things to work together for my good. Forgive me for complaining. I welcome Your pruning process in my life. Cut away my unfruitful branches so I can bear much fruit for You. And purify Your church in 2020 so we can welcome a fresh movement of Your Holy Spirit in this new season.” {eoa}

J. Lee Grady was editor of Charisma for 11 years before he launched into full-time ministry in 2010. Today he directs The Mordecai Project, a Christian charitable organization that is taking the healing of Jesus to women and girls who suffer abuse and cultural oppression. Author of several books, including 10 Lies the Church Tells Women, he has just released his newest book, Set My Heart on Fire, from Charisma House. You can follow him on Twitter at @LeeGrady or go to his website, .