

Understanding Tribulation

by Charles Leiter

Tribulation is a refining process that helps us grow and become more like Christ, and it is a sign of God's love and sovereignty.

Duration: 43:58

Scripture: Acts 14:19

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Tribulation"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of understanding that believers are valuable and precious to God. He uses three different metaphors - the refining of metal, the pruning of a vine, and the chastening of a son - to illustrate the process of spiritual growth and purification. The preacher highlights the painfulness of this process, comparing it to a blast furnace and emphasizing the need for believers to endure trials and tribulations. The sermon concludes with a reminder that believers must remember and believe that they must go through these refining processes in order to have a living communion with God and partake in His holiness.

Transcript

We open our Bibles this evening to Acts chapter 14. Should we pray once again? Our Father we ask thee that you would glorify your name this evening and that you'd help your people for your name's sake and for your glory because you're alone, you alone are worthy. In Jesus' name, amen.

Acts chapter 14 and we'll start reading at verse 19. And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium who persuaded the people, and having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. Having stoned Paul.

Read over that pretty lightly, don't we? Howbeit as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up and came into the city, and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the gospel to that city and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra and to Iconium and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed.

If you'll hold your place here in Acts, we're going to read three other scriptures. 1 Peter chapter 1 and verse 6, wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through

manifold temptation, that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ. And if you'll turn with me to John 15, we have here in Peter the trial of your faith like gold, more precious than gold, though tried with fire.

And John 15 verses 1 and 2, I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit, he taketh away. And every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

And then Hebrews chapter 12. You just need to hold your place in Acts. Hebrews chapter 12.

And we'll start reading at verse 3. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be worried and faint in your mind. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood striving against sin, and ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children. My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.

For whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons. For what son is he whom the Father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye illegitimate and not sons.

Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence. Shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure, but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous.

Nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby." Back to Acts chapter 14. I'd like to invite your attention this evening to verse 22. These apostles return, confirming the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and then particularly what we want to look at tonight, and that we must, through much tribulation, enter into the kingdom of God.

We see here these apostles, Barnabas and Paul, anxious and concerned about these new converts, wanting to help them, wanting to encourage them. And so we read here in verse 21 that they return to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch so that they could confirm and exhort and strengthen and encourage them. And part of their essential message to these new converts was this phrase that we're going to look at tonight.

We must, through much tribulation, enter the kingdom of God. That was part of the standard apostolic message to the new converts. But it was more than their message to new converts, wasn't it? It was their message to the church over and over again in their epistles.

Now, why do we need to be reminded so often? Well, you know why. Because we forget so often. We forget it real quick.

And so what I want to do this evening, the Lord helping me, is to stir up your pure mind by way of reminder. And I won't be telling you anything you don't know. But if God could get it into our hearts again, it could help us.

And we need it. We need it again and again. I want to begin then by calling your attention to two little words in this sentence that we have a very hard time believing.

And the first one is the word must. We must. We must.

Do you believe that, beloved? We must. It's one of those absolute certainties we've been talking about. We must.

We must. We must. In 1 Thessalonians 3.3, it says, We have been appointed for affliction.

And that word appointed is the same word that's translated in the word predestination. It's the word destined. Destiny.

Now, if I could tell you your destiny tonight, or let's put it this way, God has told you your destiny tonight. And part of what He's told you as your destiny, beloved, part of your destiny is that you're going to have affliction. That's part of your destiny.

And you know, whenever things slow down a little bit and ease off a little bit, we get to putting that out of our minds pretty quick, because that's real. But it's real. We must.

We must pass through these tribulations. We must. It's part of our destiny.

And you know, there's a lot of different kinds of tribulations. We may live in a country where you don't get tortured and put in prison. But, beloved, you get down and give yourself totally to the Lord.

And you get up and start seeking to walk with Him. You're going to run into some tribulations. And God's going to see to it that you do.

Now, that might not seem kind at first, but there's a reason for it. We must go through these things. Have we settled down to this? It takes a long time to get settled down to this, doesn't it? Every time one of them's over, we're ready to start thinking there won't be another one.

And even if we say that there'll be another one, we don't really accept that reality until it gets upon us. We must, in that second little word, through much tribulation, inherit the kingdom. We don't like that one either, do we? Through much.

We must, through much tribulation, inherit the kingdom of God. We're talking here about tribulation of all shapes and sizes and a good measure of it. That's what much means.

It means little trials. It means big trials. It means trials on the outside.

It means trials on the inside. It means trials that hit you from the side just as hard as you can be hit, just knock the wind out of you. And it means trials that just slip in like this, you know, insidious trials that deceive you, deceitful trials.

It means all shapes and all sizes, trials that come one at a time, trials that come in bunches, just bang, bang, bang like that. You know what that's like. Much tribulation, many trials.

We must, through much tribulation, inherit the kingdom. And notice what they did here then in verse 22. They confirmed the souls of the disciples and they exhorted them.

In other words, they were concerned about them and wanted to build them up. They wanted to confirm them. And that word confirm is just a word sometimes translated strengthen.

Confirm and strengthen. And this word exhorted is also translated comfort and encourage. And other places, you know, the very same word translated comfort and encourage.

Now, how did they comfort and encourage and strengthen and build up these new converts? Well, we said the way they did it, they told them, you got a hard time coming. Now, how does that comfort and encourage you? That message to me doesn't sound very comforting and encouraging, but it is. It's comforting.

It's helpful. Yeah. First of all, it's encouraging because it's honest.

It's honest. It fits reality. Now, we saw last night that part of spiritual reality is that we are going to go through times where we have to persist.

Well, how much more helpful is it to know this is reality? This is what God has said. This fits reality. The mark of a cult and a false teaching and a false religion in general is that it lives in a dream world.

And we need to thank God that He's honest with us and tells us the truth about things. And it fits. It fits.

You know, if you become a Christian, everything will be exciting. That's not said in so many words, but that word exciting comes up so many times that that's what's being said. And everything's going to go fine, you know.

And it's a dream world. It's a lie. And it deceives.

You know, you'll have financial prosperity and good health and everything else. You think of how utterly despairing you'd feel tonight if the Bible actually taught that, beloved. Think of that.

The Christian would. I mean, these people that lie to themselves all the time, they go around getting beaten to face with reality and don't even realize what's going on. But the Christian has some spiritual discernment, and he knows that's not the truth.

Things come. Things hit us. The trials fall upon us, and the Bible is honest.

God's honest. He says there in 1 Peter, he said, Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial that is to try, as though some strange thing happened to you. This is reality.

You know, about every fiery trial I've ever got into, I think about every one, the first thing I did was think it was strange. And if that happens whenever God's told you reality, what kind of shape would we be in? But I'll tell you another reason why this message is encouraging, and that is because to be forewarned is to be forearmed, to be told ahead of time. It's a help.

If you turn with me, please, to 1 Thessalonians, chapter 3. 1 Thessalonians 3, and we'll just read what Paul said here about this. Wherefore, when we could no longer forbear, we thought it good to be left at Athens alone, and sent to Malthus, our brother and minister of God, and our fellow laborer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you. That's the very same word, exactly, translated confirm, or strengthen, confirm over there in Acts 14, and to comfort you.

And that's the same word, exactly, translated exhort, or encourage. To establish and comfort you concerning your faith, that no man be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are appointed, destined thereunto.

Now, how do they know? It tells us in the next verse. For verily, when we were with you, we told you before that we should suffer tribulation, even as it came to pass, and ye know. He told them ahead of time.

He said, We warned you ahead of time, you were forewarned and forearmed, and so it came to pass. Well, these apostles here in Acts 14, then, one way that they strengthened and encouraged these Christians was just by telling them ahead of time, warning them ahead of time, that through many tribulations, through much tribulation, through all kinds of tribulation, we must enter the kingdom. But there's something else they did.

There's something else they did. They taught these new Christians how to understand and interpret those tribulations when they did come. They taught them how to understand and interpret them.

You realize that these verses in Acts are just a summary of all that was said. When Peter preached there on the day of Pentecost, or a little later on, or when Paul preached there on Mars Hill, he said a lot more than just what it takes us time to read in our Bible. You know, that would be about a two-minute sermon a lot of times.

And you can be sure that these apostles said a lot more than just one time telling these Christians, Now, you've got to pass through many tribulations to inherit the kingdom. They dwelt on it, beloved. They spent some time on it.

And most important of all, they taught them how to understand and interpret these things when they came. How do I know that they did that? How do I know that they taught them how to understand these things? Well, I know it because they did it over and over again in their epistles. They taught Christians how to understand tribulation.

Beloved, this is extremely important, and I just want to spend the remainder of our time on it tonight. Tonight, the Lord Jesus himself and his apostles have told us not only that the trials are coming, but they've told us how to understand and interpret them. And to do that, they've given us three major pictures, and we read those at the start.

They said, Do you want to understand what's happening to you? Well, one way to think about it is to think about the refining of a metal. Now, what we read in 1 Peter 1, think about the refining of a metal, your faith being purified in the fire. And another way to think about it, think about the pruning of a vine.

And another way to think about it, think about the chastening of a son. Okay, three major ways that they taught us to understand these things. Now, the remarkable thing about it is that these three pictures are all saying exactly the same thing in three different ways.

God's kind to do that, isn't he? And we're so thick-headed. I mean, we have to have it a hundred different ways before it gets through. But he said the same thing three different ways in these three pictures.

And what he's saying to us is extremely helpful and precious for any child of God that's in the midst of that trial and tribulation. Extremely helpful. Christian, this is for you tonight if you're in that fire, that tribulation.

It's for you. What's God saying to you about your trial by means of these three pictures? First of all, he's telling you your preciousness in his sight, the preciousness of the believer. In the sight of God.

What's the first thing you're tempted to have come into your mind when you do get into that fire? Well, it's something along this line. Where's God? What's happened? I've failed him so much. I've been such a mess.

I've done so bad that finally he's just cast me off. Where is he? What have I done? Where is his love? Where is God? And usually it takes the form, not that even necessarily that God is messing up somehow or another. Maybe the devil can't trick you on that.

But it gets you to the point of looking at how bad off you've been and how much you've messed up. And he'll convince you that that's the problem. Really, that's the problem.

And God has just pulled away back from you because you've messed up and you're so worthless, utterly worthless in his sight. Beloved, look what God's saying to you. He says, I'm refining you.

I'm refining you. I want to ask you a question. Do men go out and gather up some dirt and refine it? You don't do that.

You see what he's saying? You go out and you refine. It's a big process to refine. And it costs money.

There's a lot of things not worth refining. It costs you more to refine them than what you got when you get done. You refine gold, beloved.

You refine gold. And the Lord Jesus and the Father in heaven telling us here how precious we are to him. That's what he's telling us.

I'm refining you. You're precious to me. You're so precious to me that I'm refining you like a man refines gold or silver.

Oh, he says, I'm pruning you. I'm pruning you. And I'm pruning you not because you're worthless, but because you're bearing fruit.

I'm pruning you because you may not have too much, but you've got a little bit. That's an encouragement right there, isn't it? Preciousness in his sight. And he says, I love you.

And you're precious to me and you're bearing some fruit. That's why I'm doing this. Every branch of bean that bears fruit, he purges it.

And beloved, it's the branch that bears the fruit that gets the knife. It's the branch that bears the fruit. It's a sign that you're fruitful in some measure.

And the very time that it seems like he doesn't love you is the time that he's the nearest. I have a little quote. It says, the gardener is never so near as when he's pruning.

At the time he seems the farthest away, but he's never so near. He gets right down in there, you know, and prunes. Oh, he says, I'm chasing you.

Who does the Father chase him? A father doesn't chase those illegitimate ones. He'd like to just as soon not even see them at all. He chases the ones that are so special to him, that he loves so much, that he

wants one day to be worthy to be an heir of his property and his inheritance.

In other words, this chastening is a sign of the Lord's special love and special care for us. Whom the Lord loves, he chastens. Now, do you see he's saying this every which way and angle? You know, he takes it one time from the field of horticulture or gardening or whatever you want to call it.

He takes it another time from human experience, takes it another time from the refining of metal. Every other way he's saying it. He's saying it over and over to you.

The one thing the devil's going to attack you on first, and that is that you're important to him and you're precious to him, and he hasn't left you. That's the first thing he says. That's the underlying reality in every one of those three pictures.

You see that? That's the foundation for the picture, for the parable. The foundation is, this thing is valuable to me. What else is he saying? The painfulness of the process.

He says, first of all, he says, it's like a fire. It's like a fire, like a blast furnace, what it's like. We're not talking about a campfire.

We're talking about a blast furnace. Not too long ago, I saw a blast furnace in operation, and you talk about a frightening thing. I mean, have you ever looked into the mouth of a blast furnace? My, oh my, that's not fire.

I don't know what you call that. That's terrible. And he says, it's going to hurt.

He's telling us this. He says, I'm going to put you in there and blast you. I'm not going to heat you up.

I'm going to blast you, and then I'm going to skim. I'm going to let you cool down, and then I'm going to blast you again. I'm going to skim you again.

I'm going to let you cool down, and then I'm going to blast you again. How many times, Lord? Seven times. Like silver refined in a furnace of earth.

Seven times. It's going to hurt. He says, it's like a knife slicing away.

I want to tell you, he says, I want to tell you what it's going to be like. It's going to be like being put in a blast furnace. It's going to be like having the living tissue sliced away, cut with a knife.

And the Lord Jesus says, every branch in me that bears fruit, He purges it. He prunes it. Have you ever felt a knife? You haven't.

You're not one of His. He says, it's like a scourge. Like a scourge.

Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth and scourges every son. Scourges. That is a hard word, isn't it? Scourge.

I know you preachers know all about scourging as far as reading about it. I've had to discipline my son, my little boy, pretty severely sometimes. But the idea of scourging him, I never think of using that word.

I mean, the Jews, when they scourged a man, they took him out there and strapped him on a post and whipped him around with that three-quartered whip they had. The Romans, after they got done doing it,

you just about were dead already. And yet this is the word that God uses.

When He's talking about disciplining His children, He says He scourges it. What's He saying to us? He's saying the painfulness of the process. That's what He's saying.

He's not only saying you're going to have tribulations, He's saying it's going to hurt you something terrible. It's going to hurt, beloved. You're going to be in the breath furnace.

You're going to have a knife cutting into you. You're going to have a scourge applied to you. That's what those tribulations are going to be like.

I'm thankful He didn't say all tribulations. I mean, that it's all the time. It's much tribulation.

It's not all the time. We couldn't take it, could we? But there's going to be much. Do you know anything about being scourged? If you don't, you're not a son, because it says He scourges every son.

That's an encouragement, see? You're getting scourged while you say it couldn't be this bad for a child of God. It couldn't possibly be this hard. That's what He's telling you.

It is going to be this hard. And you don't think anybody else has ever felt like this. How could you be a like this? He says, I told you it was going to hurt, and hurt bad.

What's the third thing He's telling us? The goal in view. The goal in view. You think of this medal.

What's the goal in view? Purity. Purity. Freedom from dross.

Isn't that a precious thought? Freedom from dross. And you know, we can get to realizing and dwelling on our sinfulness so much that we get to missing some of what God is saying to us. He's saying that He's going to purify us.

And you're actually going to make some progress in the Christian life. I mean, what you are in yourself is never going to change, but God's going to move you on in grace, and purify you, and cause you to actually become more and more pure. That's encouraging, isn't it, brother? That's encouraging.

He's going to move us on and change us. He doesn't put you in that fire so you can come out the same way you were. Put you in that fire so He can skim a little of that stuff off of you, that scum, that you've been praying that He would skim off.

You know how He does it? He does it by putting you in the fire. And the scum begins to rise to the top when you're in the fire. And you don't feel like you're getting holier.

I'll tell you that much. You feel like you're getting more unholy, don't you? You say, if this is the way to progress, I'm not making any progress. You say, oh Lord, I'm going backwards in my Christian life.

I'm more unholy than I was. But little by little, He starts skimming it off whenever He's got everything hot enough. It cools you down.

He does it again later. Why? Well, it's been said, you know, so we can see His reflection. I think that's it.

So we can see His reflection. I always said it's like a vine. We're talking about the goal in view.

What's the goal in view? That it might bear more fruit. Bear fruit already a little bit. That it might bear more fruit.

You want to be fruitful? You've prayed that. And God is answering that prayer. And the precious thing about it is, is that it's effectual.

He's not a foolhardy gardener. He knows what He's doing to get more fruit. And He'll actually get more fruit.

If you felt like you never were going to make any progress through all this, it'd be pretty disheartening. But you actually will. You actually will be more like the Lord Jesus.

Isn't that precious? A few years ago, I bought a cherry tree from a company that is the great tree company in Missouri. And their name is Starks Brothers. I don't know if you have Starks Brothers down here.

Well, that's from Louisiana, Missouri. Not Louisiana, Missouri, but Louisiana, Missouri. And Starks Brothers sent me a catalog with this cherry tree that I bought.

I want to read you the gospel according to Starks Brothers in this matter of pruning. To get a new fruit tree off to the right start, nothing is more important than pruning at planting time. Yet all too often, this initial pruning is overlooked by the home grower.

Many beginners seem to balk at the basic idea. But if the bare root tree is left unpruned, it may not grow well. And in dry weather, it may not grow at all.

It will take longer to bear the plentiful crops it should. You might fear it hurts the tree. Or you might think it's wasteful to give your tree a substantial setback in size.

You ever felt like that? That's wasteful. Oh my. Why this waste? You might even mistakenly feel this pruning will delay the first crop of fruit.

That's the expert talking. He said you might mistakenly feel that. In all these cases, quite the opposite is true.

Here's why you There are three basic reasons. Survival, stimulation, and shaping. That's the three reasons.

I don't know if this guy's a Christian or not. Survival, stimulation, and shaping. That's why you prune.

Usually after a single growing season, the tree you prune will be bigger than a matching unpruned tree. Most important, your tree needs to be shaped. The husky young trees you get from Starks Brothers have far too many branches.

Left unpruned, your tree would become a crowded thicket, nearly impossible to correct in later years. It's not really difficult. Just grit your teeth and do it.

Even though you may be cutting off more than seems right, it's far better to over prune at planting time than to under prune. You hear him, miss? I can assure you, here's the master speaking. He's come from a long line of fruit growers, fruit tree growers.

I can assure you that this pruning will result in a sturdier, healthier tree. You'll be getting the right start toward a strong framework. And, now get this, you'll be rewarded with bigger, better crops of fruit.

Bigger, better crops of fruit. What kind of a gardener would God be if he just left that crowded thicket there that he was talking about? The goal and view for the vine, more fruit. What about the son? What's the goal and view for the son? That we might be partakers of his holiness.

And we prayed and cried out to God and said, Oh God, I long to be more like Jesus. I long to be more like thee. Do you hear what he says? He says he's doing this.

He's scourging that you might be a partaker of his holiness. His holiness. The divine nature.

God in you and expressed through you. It's worth any price to have that. To have God.

We're not talking about some kind of moral outward conformity that you work out on yourself. We're talking about living communion with God. Partakers of his holiness.

Well, beloved, that's how the apostles strengthened and encouraged these new converts. They taught them how to rightly understand. They taught them they were coming, yeah.

And that's a big help. But they taught them how to rightly understand. And they did it in different ways.

And, of course, God was behind it all. No man could think up these things. God gave those pictures to us.

And he said the same thing in different ways, you know, to bring it home to us. To confirm and strengthen us, too. Hebrews 12 says, My son, my child, despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of him.

You know, the two things when we're in the middle of it. These are the two things where the test comes. Despising, first of all.

You just get mad about it. You know, blow up against it. And he said, don't do that.

Nor faint when you're rebuked by him. You just wilt under the thing and say, oh, God, this is too much. I can't take it.

And he says, don't do that. Get up and submit yourself. Shall we not subject ourselves to the Father of spirits and live? May God help us when we get in it to remember these things.

You know, a lot of our sin problems, really, we're acting just like children. I mean, childish, not like children of God, but childish. The things I spank my kids for are the stuff I'm doing all the time toward God.

Sorry to say. And this is what we're talking about. We're talking about in all these parables here, we're talking about just being mature enough to begin to comprehend that what God is doing is for my good and that he's dealing with me as with a son.

And that this is something that proves his love for me. Because he loves me. We couldn't do it.

We couldn't face these realities, could we? If it weren't for that, because he loves us, that's the reason. May the Lord help us as those much tribulations that must come do come.

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