

A DIRECT EXPOSÉ ON PRUNING,
OBEDIENCE, AND THE FRUIT
YOU WERE NEVER TOLD WOULD COST

— EVERYTHING —

THE KNIFE THAT BRINGS LIFE

A gloved hand holding a bloody knife, dripping blood onto a small plant. The knife is a folding knife with a textured handle and a sharp blade. The glove is dark and appears to be made of leather or a similar material. The plant is small and has several leaves. The background is a light, textured surface. The overall tone is dark and ominous.

WHEN THE FATHER'S LOVE HURTS

The KNIFE That Brings *Life*: When the Father's Love Hurts

*A Direct Exposé on Pruning, Obedience, and the Fruit You Were Never Told
Would Cost Everything*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: The Thing Nobody Preaches Anymore

PART ONE: THE TEXT YOU'VE BEEN AVOIDING

- Chapter 1: Let's Just Read It. All of It. No Escaping.
- Chapter 2: Three Characters, One Knife
- Chapter 3: Two Kinds of Branches (And You Are Definitely One of Them)

PART TWO: WHAT THE KNIFE CUTS

- Chapter 4: Sin You've Been Cuddling
- Chapter 5: Good Things You Turned Into Gods
- Chapter 6: Your Ego and Your Easy Button
- Chapter 7: People You Need to Lose
- Chapter 8: The Prison Before the Palace

PART THREE: THE PARADOX THAT BREAKS EVERYONE

- Chapter 9: More Fruit = More Pruning (Yes, You Read That Right)
- Chapter 10: Why Most Christians Quit Here

PART FOUR: OBEDIENCE WITHOUT THE VEGAS LIGHTS

- Chapter 11: What Obedience Actually Looks Like (Boring and Brutal)
- Chapter 12: The Father Isn't Mad at You (He's Making You Useful)
- Chapter 13: Asking Whatever You Wish (The Verse Nobody Should Quote Without the First Half)

PART FIVE: THE FIRE (AND WHY IT'S NOT FOR YOU)

- Chapter 14: The Branches That Burn
- Chapter 15: What the Modern Church Gets Wrong About Almost Everything
- CONCLUSION: The Knife Is Love. Stop Flinching.

INTRODUCTION: The Thing Nobody Preaches Anymore

It's 2:13 AM. You're in bed. Phone at full brightness because you hate yourself, apparently.

You just spent forty-five minutes scrolling. A worship video. A sermon clip. A meme about how "God's plan is better than your plan." Then an ad for a Christian conference about "living your best life now." Then a post from that one guy who says God told him to buy a sports car.

You close the app. Open your Bible app. Because guilt.

You land on John 15.

You read: *"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."*

Then verse 6: *"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."*

You read it again.

Fire.

Not a metaphorical campfire where everyone sings *Kumbaya*. Fire fire.
You lock your phone. Put it on the nightstand. Stare at the ceiling.

And you think: *Why doesn't anyone talk about this?*

Not in a mean way. Not in a "I'm deconstructing" way. Just honest. You've sat through hundreds of sermons. Thousands of worship songs. Dozens of conferences. And you can count on one hand the number of times someone mentioned the fire part.

They talked about abiding. They talked about fruit. They talked about asking whatever you wish (oh, they loved that part). But somewhere between verse 5 and verse 7, verse 6 just... disappeared. Like it got lost in editing. Like someone decided it was too harsh for the target audience.

Here's what I'm going to do in this book.

I'm going to say what nobody says anymore. Not because I'm brave. I'm not. I'm scared of your comments section. I'm scared of losing book deals and speaking invites and the quiet approval of people who think "balance" is the highest Christian virtue.

But I'm more scared of standing in front of Jesus with a Bible in my hand and explaining why I edited out the parts that made people uncomfortable.

So here it is.

The Knife.

That's the book. That's the whole thing. God cuts. It hurts. You grow. Or you don't, and then there's fire.

No. I'm not going to soften that. Not even a little.

If you came here for a gentle devotional about how God is going to give you a promotion and a parking space, you bought the wrong book. Return it. Give it to someone you don't like.

But if you're tired of spiritual junk food—if you're ready to sit down to a meal that might bite back—then turn the page.

Because the Father has a knife in His hand.

And He's not aiming at the dead wood.

He's aiming at you.

PART ONE:
THE TEXT YOU'VE BEEN AVOIDING

Chapter 1:

Let's Just Read It. All of It. No Escaping.

I'll never forget the first time I tried to preach John 15.

I was twenty-two. Youth pastor at a small church. Eager. Dumb. Thought I was going to change the world with a PowerPoint and three worship songs.

I stood up. Opened my Bible. Read verses 1 through 5. Felt good. The abiding language. The vine and branches. People were nodding. One elderly woman whispered, "Precious."

Then I got to verse 6.

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

The nodding stopped.

A man in the third row crossed his arms. The worship leader started fiddling with his guitar pick. The elderly woman who said "precious" now looked like she'd swallowed a hornet.

I kept reading. Verses 7 and 8. The asking-whatever-you-wish part. People started nodding again. Relief. Like I'd found the emergency brake on a downhill truck.

After the service, three different people said the same thing: "Great message, but that fire part seemed a little... intense."

One of them—I'll never forget this—said, "I think you focused too much on the negative."

Too much on the negative.

Jesus says "thrown into the fire and burned," and I'm the one being too negative.

Let me ask you something. And I want you to really sit with this.

If Jesus said it, who are you to call it negative?

If the Son of God—the one who healed the sick, raised the dead, died for your sins, and rose on the third day—if *He* decided that verse 6 needed to be in the Bible, then maybe, just maybe, verse 6 is actually *positive*.

Maybe the fire is not the bad news.

Maybe the bad news is the branch that doesn't bear fruit.

Think about it.

What's worse: being cut by the Vinedresser or being left alone to wither?

What's worse: the temporary pain of pruning or the permanent silence of abandonment?

I know which one scares me.

It's not the knife.

It's the field where the knife never comes.

Before we go any further—before I say another word about what this text means, how it applies, or why you should care—I need to do something that most Christian books don't do anymore.

I need to let the text speak for itself.

No commentary. No Greek word studies. No stories about my aunt's neighbour who experienced pruning and then got a parking spot at the mall.

Just the words. The ones Jesus said. The ones we keep editing.

So here is John 15:1–8. In full. No skipping. No softening. No "but what this really means is..."

Just read it.

John 15:1–8 (ESV)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

Now read it again. Slower this time.

Don't skim. Don't let your eyes glide over the hard parts like they're speed bumps you're trying to ignore.

"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away."

Not "he gently relocates." Not "he gives a stern talking to." *Takes away.*

"Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes."

Not "he encourages." Not "he sends a nice thought." Prunes. Which is gardening language for cuts.

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers... thrown into the fire, and burned."

Not "he experiences temporary discomfort." Not "he misses out on his best life now." *Burned.*

Do you see why we skip this?

Do you see why your pastor might have preached a twelve-week series on the Vine and the Branches and somehow spent eleven of those weeks on verses 4 and 5?

Because verse 6 is a problem.

Not for God. For us.

Verse 6 doesn't fit the version of Christianity we've built—the one where God is always nice, always affirming, always nodding along with our life choices like a cosmic grandparent who's just happy we showed up.

Verse 6 is a chainsaw to that version.

And here's what's wild. Here's what nobody talks about.

Verse 6 is not the bad news.

Stay with me.

If you are a branch that is actually connected to the vine—if there is genuine life flowing from Jesus into you—then verse 6 is not about you. It's not even aimed at you. It's a description of what happens to branches that *look* like they belong but don't.

But here's the part that should terrify you.

The branches that get thrown into the fire? They were *in Him*.

Read it again. Verse 2: *"Every branch IN ME that does not bear fruit he takes away."*

Not branches that never knew Him. Branches *in Him*. Branches that looked like they belonged. Branches that were connected enough to get cut.

And they still got thrown into the fire.

I told you I wasn't going to soften anything.

Let me pause here and say something directly to you.

I don't know what you're going through right now. I don't know if you're reading this because you're curious, because you're desperate, or because someone gave you this book and said "you need to read this" and you rolled your eyes but now you're here.

But I know this.

You have heard a version of Christianity that told you God's main goal is your happiness.

You have heard sermons that said "God has a wonderful plan for your life" and then listed all the ways that plan involves your comfort, your success, and your self-esteem.

You have been told that pruning is just a metaphor for "difficult seasons" and that the fire is just a metaphor for "feeling distant from God" and that verse 6 is really about how God would never actually burn anyone because that would be unloving.

And you have felt, somewhere in your gut, that something about that version is wrong.

Not because you're a theologian. Not because you've studied the Greek. But because you've lived long enough to know that love sometimes cuts. That growth sometimes hurts. That the things that made you stronger almost never felt good at the time.

You know this. Even if you've never said it out loud.

The version of Christianity that removes the knife and the fire is not Christianity. It's a coping mechanism. It's a religion designed by people who are terrified of the God who actually exists, so they invented a god who doesn't challenge them.

That god doesn't save anyone.

That god didn't die on a cross.

That god won't be there when you stand face to face with the One whose eyes are like fire.

So here's what we're going to do in this chapter.

We're going to sit in John 15:1–8. Not move past it. Not hurry to the application. Just sit.

We're going to let the text say what it says, even when it makes us uncomfortable. Especially when it makes us uncomfortable.

And we're going to ask one question, over and over, until it either breaks us or sets us free:

What if Jesus meant exactly what He said?

Not what we want Him to mean. Not what our culture has trained us to hear. Not what feels safe and affirming and non-threatening.

What if He meant exactly what He said?

Let's find out.

Verse 1: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."

Stop right there.

Jesus doesn't say "I am a vine." He says "*I am the true vine.*"

Which means there are false vines.

There are other things you can attach yourself to that look like they offer life but don't. Careers. Relationships. Achievements. Approval. Your Instagram following. Your retirement account. Your reputation. Your political tribe. Your favourite hobby that you've turned into an identity.

All of them look like vines. All of them promise life. All of them will leave you dry and withered the moment you actually need something.

Jesus is the *true* vine. Not one option among many. The only one that actually delivers what it promises.

And the Father? He's not sitting on a cloud somewhere, vaguely pleased that you showed up to church occasionally. He's the vinedresser. He's working. He's tending. He's actively, intentionally, relentlessly involved in the process of making the vine produce fruit through the branches.

Which means He's not passive.

He's not "letting things happen."

He's *making* things happen. Including the things you don't like.

Verse 2: "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

Here's where the knife enters the room.

Two kinds of branches. Two outcomes.

The first kind: branches that are *in Him* but don't bear fruit. They get taken away. Removed. Cut out.

The second kind: branches that bear fruit. They don't get left alone. They don't get a trophy. They get pruned. Which means they get cut too. Just differently.

The first cut is removal. The second cut is trimming.

Both are cuts.

If you are a branch that is actually connected to Jesus, you will experience one of these two cuts. There is no third option where you get to just sit there, undisturbed, growing nothing, losing nothing, changing nothing.

Either you bear no fruit and get taken away, or you bear fruit and get pruned.

Those are the options.

Notice what's not on the table: "bear fruit and then get rewarded with comfort."

Not there.

"Bear fruit and then get promoted to a position where you don't need pruning anymore."

Also not there.

"Bear enough fruit that the Vinedresser eventually puts down the knife and just lets you be."

Read it again. It never says that.

It says "prunes, that it may bear more fruit." Which means the *more* fruit you bear, the more pruning you get. Because "more fruit" is the goal, not "enough fruit."

The Vinedresser doesn't stop when you're productive. He stops when you're dead or when the harvest comes. And the harvest hasn't come yet.

Verse 3: "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."

This verse is easy to miss. It's a breath between the cuts.

Jesus reminds them—reminds us—that the Word has already done something. They are *clean*. Not because of their performance. Not because of their fruit. Because of what He spoke.

But don't mistake this for a free pass.

The word that made them clean is the same word that now demands fruit. The same Word that saves is the same Word that prunes. Grace doesn't remove the knife. Grace is the knife, applied by the hand of a Father who loves you too much to leave you mediocre.

Verse 4: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

This is the verse everyone quotes. The abiding verse. The cosy verse. The one that shows up on coffee mugs and throw pillows and Instagram stories with a soft filter and a picture of a sunset.

And it's true. It's beautiful. It's essential.

But here's what nobody tells you about abiding.

Abiding is not a feeling. It's not a devotional high. It's not the fifteen minutes you spend reading your Bible in the morning before the chaos of the day drowns out everything you read.

Abiding is staying. When it's boring. When it's hard. When you don't feel anything. When God seems silent. When the pruning hurts so much you want to pull away from the vine just to make the pain stop.

Abiding is what the branch does when the knife is cutting. It doesn't let go. It doesn't run. It stays connected to the vine even while the Vinedresser is cutting into it.

Because the branch knows something that we keep forgetting: apart from the vine, it can do *nothing*.

Not "less." Not "not as much." *Nothing*.

Zero fruit. Zero life. Zero purpose. Zero hope.

So abiding isn't optional. It's not the "advanced track" of discipleship. It's the only track.

Verse 5: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Jesus repeats Himself. Because we're slow.

I am the vine. You are the branches.

Not the other way around. You don't get to be the vine. You don't get to decide what fruit looks like. You don't get to set the timeline. You're the branch. Your job is to stay connected and let the Vinedresser do His work.

Apart from me you can do nothing.

Not "you can do some things but not the important things." Nothing. Zero. Zilch.

That sermon you preached? Nothing if He wasn't in it.

That worship song you led? Noise if He wasn't in it.

That ministry you built? A pile of wood, hay, and stubble if He wasn't the source.

That moral life you've been living so carefully? Filthy rags.

I'm not being dramatic. I'm quoting Scripture. Isaiah 64:6 says our righteous acts are like a polluted garment. Paul says in Philippians 3 that his religious credentials are garbage compared to knowing Christ.

Nothing.

Apart from Him, we can do *nothing* that matters for eternity.

That's not humility. That's reality.

Verse 6: "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

Here it is. The verse we pretend isn't there.

Let me be as clear as I know how to be.

This is not a metaphor for "feeling distant from God."

This is not a warning about having a bad week.

This is not a description of what happens to people who miss their quiet time.

This is judgment. Real judgment. Fire. Burning. Destruction.

And it happens to branches that were *in Him* but did not abide. Branches that had connection but not fruit. Branches that looked like they belonged but produced nothing.

I know that's hard to hear. I know there are people reading this who have been told, explicitly or implicitly, that once you're saved, you're always saved, and nothing you do can change that.

I'm not here to debate Calvinism vs. Arminianism. I'm here to read the text.

And the text says: branches *in Him* that don't bear fruit get taken away and burned.

You can twist that into a pretzel to make it fit your theological system. You can explain it away with Greek tenses and conditional clauses and arguments about what "in me" really means.

Or you can just believe it.

Jesus said it. He meant it. And He's not apologizing for it.

Verses 7–8: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

Here's the promise everyone wants. Ask whatever you wish. Done.

But look at the condition. It's not "if you say the right prayer." It's not "if you have enough faith." It's not "if you name it and claim it."

It's: *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you.*

Which means your wishes have been transformed. You're not asking for a new car and a promotion and a vacation home. You're asking for what He wants. Because His words are *in* you, shaping what you even desire.

This is the point where most prosperity gospel preachers stop reading. They love verse 7. They hate the abiding part.

But you can't have the promise without the prerequisite. You can't have the fruit without the pruning. You can't have the asking without the abiding.

And the goal? Not your happiness. Not your comfort. Not your best life now.

By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit.

The goal is the Father's glory. Period. Full stop. End of discussion.

If your life produces fruit that brings glory to God, then you prove that you are His disciple. Not by your theology quiz scores. Not by your church attendance. Not by your social media posts about how much you love Jesus.

By fruit.

Real fruit. The kind that comes from abiding. The kind that requires pruning. The kind that costs something.

I want to end this chapter with a question. Not a rhetorical one. A real one.

Have you actually read this passage before?

I don't mean have you skimmed it. I don't mean have you heard someone preach on it. I don't mean have you nodded along while a Bible app read it to you in a soothing voice.

I mean: have you actually read it? Sat with it? Let it sit on your chest like a two-hundred-pound weight until you couldn't breathe?

Because most Christians haven't.

Most Christians have read verses 4 and 5 and 7. They've underlined "apart from me you can do nothing" and "ask whatever you wish." They've memorized "I am the vine; you are the branches."

But they've skipped verse 2. They've definitely skipped verse 6. They've treated the fire like a typo that will get fixed in the next edition.

I'm not going to let you do that.

Not in this book.

You're going to read every word. You're going to face every hard truth. You're going to sit in the discomfort until the discomfort either drives you away or drives you to your knees.

Because here's the thing.

You can't be pruned if you won't admit the knife exists.

You can't bear fruit if you won't acknowledge that the fruitless branches get burned.

You can't abide if you won't stop running from the parts of the text that scare you.

So here we are. End of Chapter 1.

We've read the text. All of it. No escaping.

Now the real work begins.

Chapter 2: Three Characters, One Knife

Let me tell you something that took me years to learn.

The Bible is not a collection of inspirational quotes. It's a courtroom. It's an operating room. And sometimes, it's a crime scene.

John 15 is all three.

Because when Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser," He's not painting a peaceful picture for you to hang in your living room. He's drawing a diagram of exactly how life works. Who does what. Who cuts whom. And where you fit in the middle of it.

Most of us read this passage like we're watching a nature documentary. Oh, look. A vine. Some branches. A gardener with some shears. How lovely.

That's not what this is.

This is a battlefield. And you're not a spectator.

There are three characters in this passage. Three distinct roles. Three different relationships to the knife.

And if you confuse who is who, you will live your entire Christian life in fear, frustration, or false comfort.

So let's meet them. One by one. No flattery. No favouritism. Just the text.

Character One: Jesus — The True Vine

"I am the true vine."

Not **a** vine. *The true* vine.

Which means every other vine is false. Every other source of life is a counterfeit. Every other thing you attach yourself to for meaning, identity, purpose, or security is a knockoff. It might look real. It might feel real. But the moment you actually need it to produce life, it will crumble.

Let me be blunt.

You have attached yourself to other vines. I know you have. Because I have too.

The vine of career success. *If I just get that promotion, then I'll feel like I matter.*

The vine of romantic approval. *If I just find someone who loves me, then I'll be whole.*

The vine of social media validation. *If I just get enough likes, enough followers, enough comments saying I'm brilliant, then I'll know I exist.*

The vine of religious performance. *If I just read my Bible enough, pray enough, serve enough, then God will finally be pleased with me.*

All false vines. All of them.

They promise life. They deliver exhaustion. They promise fruit. They deliver burnout. They promise meaning. They deliver a quiet, nagging voice that whispers, *You're still not enough.*

Jesus doesn't whisper that.

Jesus says, *"I am the vine. You are the branches. Apart from me, you can do nothing."*

Not *you can do less*. Nothing.

That's not a threat. That's a fact. It's like telling a fish, "Apart from water, you can't breathe." That's not mean. That's just reality.

Here's what makes Jesus the true vine, and not just **a** vine.

He doesn't need you.

Stay with me. I know that sounds harsh. But listen.

False vines need you. Your career needs your ambition. Your relationship needs your effort. Your social media presence needs your constant content creation. Your religious performance needs your discipline. They all demand from you because they have nothing of their own to give.

Jesus doesn't need anything from you. He *is* life. He doesn't need you to make Him alive. He doesn't need your contributions to become sufficient. He doesn't need your good works to complete His righteousness.

He is the vine. Full stop. Complete. Self-sufficient. Lacking nothing.

Which means when you attach yourself to Him, you're not bringing anything to the table. You're receiving everything. You're not the supplier. You're the dependent.

That offends your pride. I know. It offends mine too.

But offense is the first step toward freedom.

Because the moment you stop trying to be a vine—the moment you stop trying to be the source of your own life, your own meaning, your own righteousness—you can finally rest. You don't have to produce. You just have to abide.

But here's the catch. And this is where most people bail.

Abiding is not passive. It's not sitting around waiting for magic to happen. It's active dependence. It's intentional connection. It's waking up every day and saying, *"I have nothing. You have everything. I'm staying right here."*

That's harder than trying to be the vine. Because trying to be the vine gives you the illusion of control. Abiding requires you to admit you have no control at all.

Jesus is the vine. Not you. Not your pastor. Not your favourite influencer. Not your denomination. Not your political party. Not your bank account.

The vine.

Character Two: The Father — The Vinedresser

"And my Father is the vinedresser."

This is where the knife enters the story.

The Father is not sitting on a cloud, vaguely aware that you exist. He's not a distant deity who set the universe in motion and then left it to run on autopilot. He's not a cosmic grandfather who chuckles at your sin and says, "Boys will be boys."

He's the vinedresser.

Which means He works. He tends. He cuts. He prunes. He removes. He burns.

And He does all of this with one goal: fruit.

Not your comfort. Not your happiness. Not your self-esteem. Not your American dream. Not your retirement plan. Not your reputation.

Fruit.

Let me say that again because you've been lied to by half the preachers on television.

The Father's goal for your life is not your happiness. It's your fruitfulness.

Happiness might come. It might not. The Bible never promises you'll be happy. It promises you'll be blessed, which is not the same thing. It promises you'll have joy, which is not the same thing. It promises you'll have peace, which is not the same thing.

But happy? That's not in the contract.

The contract says fruit. And fruit comes from pruning. And pruning comes from the knife. And the knife is held by the Father.

So here's the question that will determine everything about your Christian life.

Do you trust the Vinedresser?

Not do you believe He exists. Not do you agree with His theology. Not do you like His Instagram posts.

Do you trust Him when He brings the knife?

Because He will bring the knife. If you're bearing any fruit at all, He will bring the knife. He will cut things you don't want cut. He will remove things you thought were permanent. He will hurt you in ways you didn't know you could be hurt.

And in that moment, you will discover what you actually believe about the Father.

You'll discover if you believe He's good. Not just powerful. Good.

You'll discover if you believe He's wise. Not just knowledgeable. Wise.

You'll discover if you believe He loves you. Not just tolerates you. Loves you enough to cut.

Most Christians, if they're honest, don't trust the Vinedresser. They trust Jesus. They'll sing about Jesus all day. They'll wear the bracelets. They'll go to the conferences. But the Father? The one with the knife? They're not sure about Him.

They think Jesus is the nice one and the Father is the angry one. They think Jesus protects them from the Father. They think the cross was about Jesus convincing the Father to love them.

That's not Christianity. That's mythology.

The Father sent the Son. The Father planned the cross. The Father loves you so much that He gave His only Son. The Father is the one who prunes because the Father is the one who wants more fruit.

Jesus didn't come to save you from the Father. Jesus came to reveal the Father. And the Father, as revealed by Jesus, is a Vinedresser with a knife who loves you too much to leave you mediocre.

Do you trust Him?

Because if you don't, you will spend your entire life fighting the very circumstances He created for your growth. You will call it spiritual warfare when it's actually the Father pruning you. You will blame the devil when you should be thanking God. You will run from the knife when you should be kneeling before the one holding it.

The Vinedresser knows what He's doing. The question is whether you believe that.

Character Three: You — The Branch

"You are the branches."

Not the vine. Not the vinedresser. The branch.

Do you know how humiliating that is for people like us?

We live in a culture that tells you you're the main character. You're the hero of your own story. You're the protagonist. You're the one who decides what matters, what's true, what's valuable.

And Jesus looks you in the eye and says, "No. You're a branch."

A branch doesn't make the fruit. A branch doesn't decide when to grow. A branch doesn't tell the vinedresser where to cut. A branch doesn't get a vote.

A branch receives. A branch stays connected. A branch endures the knife. A branch produces what the vine supplies.

That's it.

That's your entire job description.

Stay connected. Receive life. Endure the cutting. Bear fruit.

That's it.

I can feel you wanting to add to that. You want to say, "But what about my plans? What about my dreams? What about my goals? What about my ministry? What about my calling?"

Those are all fine. But they're all branch-level concerns. The vine decides what grows. The vinedresser decides what gets cut. The branch just stays.

Here's what this means practically.

You don't get to decide what fruit looks like.

You might think fruit looks like a big church. The Vinedresser might think fruit looks like a faithful marriage. You might think fruit looks like a bestselling book. The Vinedresser might think fruit looks like a quiet life of secret prayer. You might think fruit looks like being known. The Vinedresser might think fruit looks like being forgotten.

The branch doesn't decide. The vine decides. The vinedresser decides.

You don't get to decide the timeline.

You might think fruit should come in six months. The Vinedresser might take six years. You might think you're ready for the harvest now. The Vinedresser might know you'd crumble under the weight of it. You might be begging for a platform while the Vinedresser is keeping you in a prison, just like Joseph, because the prison is the only thing that will prepare you for the palace.

The branch doesn't set the schedule. The Vinedresser does.

You don't get to decide what gets cut.

You might think that relationship is essential. The Vinedresser might cut it. You might think that job is your destiny. The Vinedresser might remove it. You might think that dream is from God. The Vinedresser might let it die.

Not because He's cruel. Because He sees what you can't see. He knows that the thing you're clinging to is the very thing keeping you from bearing more fruit. He knows that your attachment to that good thing has turned it into an idol. He knows that the only way to save you from your own small ambitions is to cut them out of your hands.

The branch doesn't negotiate. The branch abides.

The Relationship Between the Three

Here's where most people get confused.

They think the Father is cutting the branches because He's angry. They think Jesus is protecting them from the Father. They think the branch is just trying to survive.

That's not the dynamic at all.

The Father cuts *because* He loves. The Jesus who is the vine is the same Jesus who said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father." The Father and the Son are not divided on this. The Father doesn't want to cut while Jesus wants to cuddle. The Father sent Jesus. Jesus reveals the Father.

The knife is not the Son's idea and the Father's reluctance.

The knife is the plan. The whole plan. From the beginning.

Think about it.

Who cut Jesus? Who pruned the True Vine?

The Father did.

Isaiah 53:10 says, *"It was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief."*

The Father took the knife to His own Son. Not because He was angry at the Son. Because He was committed to fruit. The fruit of our salvation. The fruit of many brothers and sisters brought to glory. The fruit of the cross.

If the Father pruned His own Son, why would you expect to be spared?

But here's the difference.

When the Father pruned Jesus, Jesus was already perfect. The pruning wasn't for His improvement. It was for our redemption.

When the Father prunes you, it's for your improvement. Because you're not perfect. You're not even close. You have attachments that need cutting. You have idols that need smashing. You have self-sufficiency that needs crushing.

The Father prunes the Son for our sake. The Father prunes us for our sake.

Same knife. Same love. Different purposes.

Why This Matters for Your Life Right Now

Let me bring this down to where you live.

You're going through something right now.

Maybe it's a relationship that's falling apart. Maybe it's a job that disappeared. Maybe it's a dream that died. Maybe it's a health crisis. Maybe it's a financial collapse. Maybe it's just a slow, grinding sense that nothing is working the way you thought it would.

And you've been asking, "Why is God doing this to me?"

Stop.

That's the wrong question.

The right question is: "What is the Vinedresser cutting?"

Because He's not doing this *to* you. He's doing this *for* you. He's not punishing you. He's pruning you. He's not angry. He's focused.

But you'll never see it that way if you don't understand the three characters.

If you confuse the roles, you'll live in confusion.

If you think you're the vine, you'll exhaust yourself trying to produce life you don't have.

If you think you're the vinedresser, you'll try to cut your own branches and you'll make a bloody mess.

If you think the Father is your enemy, you'll run from the very thing that could set you free.

You are the branch. Jesus is the vine. The Father is the vinedresser.

Stay in your lane.

Let Jesus supply the life. Let the Father wield the knife. And you—you just stay connected.

That's not passive. That's the hardest work you'll ever do. Because staying connected when the knife is cutting is not natural. Every instinct tells you to pull away. Every nerve screams at you to let go. Every emotion whispers, "If this is what abiding feels like, maybe I'd be better off on my own."

That's the lie.

Apart from Him, you can do nothing.

Not less. Nothing.

So you stay. Even when it hurts. Even when you don't understand. Even when the Vinedresser cuts something you swore was permanent.

You stay.

Because the vine is true. The Vinedresser is good. And the branch that endures the knife is the branch that bears the fruit.

A Word to the One Who Feels Cut

I don't know what you're losing right now.

But I know you're losing something. Maybe everything.

Let me tell you something the Holy Spirit told me in a season when I couldn't stop bleeding.

The Vinedresser doesn't cut dead branches.

Think about that.

If you were dead, He wouldn't waste His time. He'd leave you to wither. He'd gather you for the fire. He'd be done with you.

But He's not done with you. He's cutting you. Which means you're alive. Which means you're connected. Which means you're bearing something—maybe just a tiny bud, maybe just a hint of fruit—but something worth preserving and improving.

The knife is not proof that He's angry at you.

The knife is proof that He believes in you.

He wouldn't cut a branch He didn't intend to keep. He wouldn't prune a branch He wasn't planning to use. He wouldn't waste His knife on dead wood.

So if you're bleeding today, take heart.

Not because the bleeding feels good. It doesn't.

But because the bleeding means you're still in the vineyard. And the Vinedresser hasn't given up on you.

He's just not finished with you yet.

Chapter 3: Two Kinds of Branches (And You Are Definitely One of Them)

Let me say something that might sound obvious, but most of the church has managed to miss it.

There are only two kinds of branches.

Not three. Not four. Not "it's complicated." Two.

Jesus didn't stutter. He didn't leave room for a gray area. He didn't create a special category for people who are "basically fine" or "trying their best" or "not really bearing fruit but also not really dead."

Two kinds.

Those that bear fruit.

Those that don't.

That's it. That's the entire taxonomy of the Christian life.

Everything else is noise.

The Branch That Doesn't Bear Fruit

Let's start with the one nobody wants to talk about.

"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away."

John 15:2

Not "he gently nudges." Not "he sends a strongly worded letter." Not "he gives them another chance next season."

Takes away.

The Greek word is *airo*. It means to lift up, to take away, to remove. But here's what's interesting. In ancient gardening, *airo* could also mean "to lift up" a branch that had fallen into the dirt, to clean it off, to give it one last chance.

Some scholars argue that this is what Jesus means. The Father lifts up the drooping branch. He cleans it off. He gives it better access to the sun. He does everything possible to help it bear fruit.

But if it still doesn't bear fruit?

Then *airo* means removal. Permanent. Final. The branch is cut out and thrown away.

Here's what I want you to hear.

The Father is patient, but He is not indefinite.

He will give you time. He will give you sunlight. He will give you cleansing. He will give you every possible advantage. He will lift you up when you fall. He will clean you off when you're dirty. He will do everything short of forcing you to bear fruit.

But He will not wait forever.

Because a branch that doesn't bear fruit is not just unproductive. It's parasitic. It's drawing life from the vine and giving nothing back. It's taking up space that could be used by a fruitful branch. It's consuming resources that could produce a harvest.

And the Vinedresser is not sentimental.

He's not running a botanical garden where every branch gets to stay because it's cute. He's running a vineyard. Vineyards exist for one reason: fruit. Not aesthetics. Not nostalgia. Not sentimentality.

Fruit.

If you're not bearing fruit, you're not fulfilling the purpose of your existence. And the Vinedresser will eventually do what any good vinedresser does. He will cut you out and burn you.

I told you I wasn't going to sugarcoat anything.

What "Not Bearing Fruit" Actually Looks Like

You might be reading this and thinking, "Well, I'm not sure if I'm bearing fruit. What counts as fruit? How much fruit is enough? What kind of fruit are we talking about?"

Fair questions. Let me answer them directly.

The Bible defines fruit in several ways. Let me give you the three most important.

First, fruit is character.

Galatians 5:22–23: *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."*

Notice it says *fruit*, singular, not *fruits*, plural. The Spirit produces one crop with nine flavours. If the Spirit is alive in you, these things will grow. Not perfectly. Not without struggle. But they will grow.

You cannot be connected to the vine and remain a jerk.

I'm going to say that again because there are people in your church who need to hear it.

You cannot be connected to the vine and remain a jerk.

You cannot be filled with the Spirit and stay angry. You cannot abide in Christ and keep gossiping. You cannot draw life from the True Vine and continue to be impatient, cruel, self-centred, or unforgiving.

The fruit will grow. It has to. It's not optional. It's not a suggestion. It's the natural, inevitable result of being connected to the vine.

If the fruit isn't growing, you're not connected. You might be near the vine. You might be *aware* of the vine. You might be *talking about* the vine. But you're not connected.

Second, fruit is conduct.

Ephesians 5:9: *"The fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true."*

Your actions matter. Not just your feelings. Not just your beliefs. Your actual, observable, measurable behaviour.

Are you living a life that looks like Jesus? Not perfectly. But directionally. Are you moving toward holiness or away from it? Are you becoming more honest or more deceptive? More generous or more greedy? More pure or more corrupt?

The fruit of light is good, right, and true. If your life is producing darkness—deception, selfishness, impurity—then you're not bearing fruit. You're bearing thorns. And thorns don't come from the vine.

Third, fruit is mission.

John 4:36: *"The reaper is already receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life."*

Jesus is talking about evangelism. Bringing people to salvation. Discipleship. Multiplication. The Great Commission.

Now, before you check out because you think you're "not an evangelist," hear me. Fruit doesn't mean you have to stand on a street corner with a bullhorn. Fruit means you are participating in God's mission to rescue the world. Maybe that's by sharing your faith with a co-worker. Maybe that's by funding someone who does. Maybe that's by praying for the lost. Maybe that's by raising children who love Jesus.

But if you have no role in the mission—if you're not actively, intentionally, sacrificially involved in helping people come to know Christ—then you're not bearing fruit. You're just a consumer of religious goods and services.

The vineyard exists for the harvest. If you're not part of the harvest, what are you doing here?

The Branch That Bears Fruit

Now for the good news.

"Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

John 15:2

Notice what the text does not say.

It does not say: "Every branch that bears fruit he rewards with a vacation."
It does not say: "Every branch that bears fruit he leaves alone to enjoy the success."
It does not say: "Every branch that bears fruit he promotes to a position where they don't need to grow anymore."

It says: *He prunes.*

The reward for bearing fruit is more cutting.

Let that sink in.

The world says: work hard, succeed, and then rest.
Jesus says: bear fruit, and then get cut so you can bear more.

This is the opposite of everything you've been taught. This is the opposite of the American Dream. This is the opposite of your natural inclinations.

And it's the core of the Christian life.

What Pruning Looks Like

Pruning is not a metaphor. It's not a gentle "season of growth." It's cutting. It's removal. It's the Vinedresser taking a knife to living wood and cutting away what is good so that what is best can grow.

Let me give you five things the Father cuts.

1. Sinful habits and attachments.

Hebrews 12:1: *"Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely."*

Sometimes the Father allows circumstances that force you to confront a sin you've tolerated. He may remove a relationship that was feeding your addiction. He may take away a job that was funding your greed. He may allow you to hit rock bottom so that you finally see the idol you've been worshiping.

I had a friend—I'll call him David, not his real name—who struggled with pornography for fifteen years. Fifteen years. He confessed it. He fought it. He went to counselling. He installed accountability software. But he never got free.

Then his wife found out. She didn't leave him, but she told him she would if he didn't get serious help. That was the pruning. The shame. The near-loss of his marriage.

The confrontation with the reality that his sin was going to destroy everything he loved.

He got free. Not overnight. But the pruning worked. The Father cut away the secrecy, the complacency, the half-measures. It hurt like hell. But it produced fruit.

2. Good things that have become idols.

Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac. Not because Isaac was evil. Because Abraham loved him too much. The knife didn't fall on Isaac, but it cut deep into Abraham's heart. And Abraham learned that God, not Isaac, was his ultimate treasure.

The Father does the same thing to you.

He may take away a relationship that isn't sinful but has become distracting. He may remove a hobby that isn't immoral but has become obsessive. He may shut down a ministry that isn't bad but has become an identity.

He's not being mean. He's being jealous. Not in a petty, insecure way. In a holy, protective way. He will not share His glory with another. And if you've made an idol out of something good, He will smash it. Because He loves you too much to let you worship a lesser god.

3. Ease and self-sufficiency.

Paul had a thorn in the flesh. We don't know exactly what it was. A physical ailment. A spiritual attack. A persistent temptation. Whatever it was, it was painful and humiliating.

Paul asked three times for God to remove it. Three times.

God said no.

Why? *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (2 Corinthians 12:9)

The pruning was the thorn. It kept Paul from becoming conceited. It kept him dependent. It kept him praying. It made him weak so that Christ's power could rest on him.

You've probably asked God to remove something in your life. A health issue. A financial struggle. A difficult family member. And He said no.

That wasn't rejection. That was pruning. He's not punishing you. He's protecting you from the greater danger of self-sufficiency.

Because a self-sufficient Christian is an oxymoron. You can't be self-sufficient and abide at the same time. So the Father cuts away your ease until you learn to depend on Him.

4. Relationships that hinder holiness.

This one is hard. Really hard.

Sometimes the Father removes people from your life. Not because they're evil. Sometimes because they're good people who are becoming a distraction from your walk with Him.

I've seen it happen. A friendship that used to encourage you now pulls you away from prayer. A small group that used to challenge you now just gossips. A romantic relationship that you thought was from God has slowly become an idol.

And the Father cuts.

Not with anger. With precision. He knows that some people, no matter how much you love them, are not helping you become more like Jesus. And He loves you too much to let you stay tethered to a sinking ship.

This is not abandonment. This is surgery.

5. Seasons of suffering and waiting.

Joseph spent years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. He was innocent. He was faithful. He was wronged.

And God let him rot.

For years.

No angel came to explain the plan. No prophetic word told him how long it would last. No worship song made it better. Just four walls and the slow, grinding passage of time.

That was pruning.

Those years in prison prepared Joseph to rule Egypt. They taught him patience. They broke his pride. They showed him that God could be trusted even when nothing made sense.

Without the prison, there would be no palace. Without the waiting, there would be no ruling. Without the suffering, there would be no fruit.

Your prison might not be literal bars. It might be a dead-end job. It might be a chronic illness. It might be a season of singleness that feels like it will never end. It might be the long, slow care of an aging parent. It might be the silence of God when you've been praying for years and nothing changes.

That's pruning.

The Vinedresser is not ignoring you. He's preparing you. The knife is cutting away your impatience, your entitlement, your demand that life make sense on your timeline.

And when the pruning is done, you will be ready for fruit you never imagined.

The Paradox: More Fruit = More Pruning

Here's the part that breaks people.

If you're bearing fruit, you will be pruned more. Not less. More.

Because the goal is not "enough fruit." The goal is "more fruit." And then "more fruit" after that. And then "more fruit" after that.

There is no ceiling. There is no finish line. There is no season of life where the Vinedresser puts down the knife and says, "Well done. You've arrived. No more cutting needed."

As long as you're alive and connected to the vine, you will be pruned.

This is why so many Christians burn out. They think fruitfulness is the end of the struggle. They think if they just get to a certain level of spiritual maturity, life will get easier.

It won't.

It will get harder. Because the more fruit you bear, the more the Father trusts you with the knife. The more you produce, the more He cuts. The more you grow, the more He prunes.

This is not punishment. This is promotion.

The Vinedresser doesn't waste His time on branches that can't handle the cut. If you're being pruned heavily, it's because you're bearing heavily. And if you're bearing heavily, it's because the Vinedresser believes you can bear more.

The knife is a compliment.

A Warning to the Fruitless Branch

I need to say something directly to some of you.

You're not being pruned. You're just dead.

You've been sitting in church for years. You've been listening to sermons. You've been singing songs. You've been calling yourself a Christian.

But there's no fruit.

No character transformation. No love. No joy. No peace. No patience. No kindness. No goodness. No faithfulness. No gentleness. No self-control.

No conduct change. You're still lying. Still cheating. Still gossiping. Still addicted. Still bitter. Still unforgiving.

No mission involvement. You've never led anyone to Jesus. You've never given sacrificially to the gospel. You've never even prayed for the lost by name.

And you've convinced yourself that you're just "going through a season." Or that "God isn't done with you yet." Or that "fruit takes time."

Stop lying to yourself.

The Vinedresser is not pruning you because you're not connected. You're not bearing fruit because you're not abiding. You're not abiding because you never really were in Him.

Or maybe you were, once. But you drifted. You got distracted. You started believing that Sunday attendance was the same as abiding. That listening to podcasts was the same as obedience. That agreeing with Christian doctrine was the same as being a disciple.

And now you're a branch that looks like it belongs but isn't producing anything.

Here's what the Vinedresser does with branches like you.

He takes you away.

Not immediately, maybe. He's patient. He'll lift you up. He'll clean you off. He'll give you sunlight. He'll do everything possible to help you bear fruit.

But if you refuse—if you keep producing nothing—He will eventually cut you out and throw you into the fire.

I'm not threatening you. I'm quoting Jesus.

Read John 15:6 again. Slowly.

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

That's not from me. That's from the One who loves you enough to die for you. And He's telling you the truth because He loves you.

The fire is real. The burning is real. And it's for branches that don't bear fruit.

A Promise to the Fruitful Branch

But for those of you who are bearing fruit—even just a little, even just a tiny bud that you're almost embarrassed to call fruit—I have good news.

The Vinedresser sees you.

He sees the tiny fig that's starting to form. He sees the small cluster of grapes that wasn't there last season. He sees the slow, steady growth that nobody else notices.

And because He sees it, He's going to prune you.

Not because He's angry. Because He's excited. He knows what you can become. He knows what you're capable of bearing. And He's going to cut away everything that's in the way.

It will hurt. It will confuse you. It will make you question everything you thought you knew about God.

But when it's over—when the knife is cleaned and put away, when the bleeding stops, when the new growth appears—you will look back and say, "That was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Not because the pain was fun. Because the fruit was worth it.

The Question You Can't Avoid

I'm going to end this chapter with a question. Not a soft one. Not a rhetorical one. A real question that demands a real answer.

Which branch are you?

Not which branch do you hope you are. Not which branch would your small group leader say you are. Not which branch did you used to be before life got hard.

Which branch are you right now?

Are you bearing fruit? Not perfectly. Not impressively. But truly. Is the Spirit producing His character in you? Are you living a life that looks more like Jesus than it did a year ago? Are you actively, intentionally involved in the mission of God?

Or are you just taking up space?

Are you connected to the vine in name only, drawing life but giving nothing back? Are you coasting on past spiritual experiences? Are you assuming that because you prayed a prayer twenty years ago, everything is fine?

There is no third option.

Fruit or fire. Bearing or burning. Pruned or removed.

Jesus didn't stutter.

Neither will I.

PART TWO:
WHAT THE KNIFE CUTS

Chapter 4:

Sin You've Been Cuddling

Let me describe a scene I've witnessed more times than I can count.

A counsellor's office. Two chairs. A box of tissues on the table. A young man—maybe thirty, maybe forty, maybe twenty—sitting with his shoulders hunched. He's been cheating on his wife. Or looking at things he shouldn't online. Or lying to his boss. Or stealing from the company. Or screaming at his kids.

He says, "I have a struggle."

The counsellor nods. "Tell me about your struggle."

And for the next hour, they talk about the struggle. The triggers. The childhood wounds. The coping mechanisms. The shame cycle. The relapse pattern. The recovery plan.

Weeks go by. Months. The struggle continues. The language gets more sophisticated. He can now describe his struggle in clinical terms. He knows the difference between a trigger and a lapse. He has a safety plan. He has accountability software. He has a sponsor.

But he's still struggling.

Because he's been cuddling his sin.

He's given it a name. "Struggle." Not "sin."

Not "rebellion." Not "idolatry." Struggle. A struggle is something you fight. Something you manage. Something you're working on. Something that earns you sympathy points in a counsellor's office.

Sin is something you kill.

There's a difference.

The Problem with "Struggle" Language

I'm not against counselling. I'm not against recovery language. I'm not against being honest about your brokenness.

But I am against renaming sin to make it feel less sinful.

The modern church has done this masterfully. We don't say "adultery" anymore. We say "an affair." We don't say "lust." We say "purity struggle." We don't say "greed." We say "financial anxiety." We don't say "gossip." We say "processing with a friend." We don't say "pride." We say "low self-esteem dressed up as confidence."

We've turned sin into a collection of quirks and coping mechanisms. We've medicalized rebellion. We've therapized idolatry.

And then we wonder why the knife never comes.

The Father cannot prune what you refuse to name. He cannot cut what you're still cuddling. He cannot remove what you're still protecting.

So He lets you sit there. With your "struggle." With your "affair." With your "purity issue." With your "anger management challenge."

And you think He's being patient.

He's not being patient. He's being surgical. He's waiting for you to stop petting the snake so He can cut off its head.

But as long as you're cuddling it, He can't cut it. Because you'll fight Him. You'll scream. You'll say, "Not that! That's my struggle! That's part of who I am! That's how I cope!"

And the Father will step back. And wait. And let you keep cuddling your sin until you realize that the thing you're holding is killing you.

Hebrews 12:1 – The Text That Should Terrify You

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely."

Two things to notice.

First: "Every weight."

Not just sin. *Weight*. Things that aren't necessarily sinful but are slowing you down. Good things. Fine things. Permissible things. Things that would be perfectly acceptable on a Tuesday afternoon but become anchors when you're running a race.

The Father cuts weights too. Not because they're evil. Because they're heavy. And you can't run fast carrying a suitcase full of good intentions.

Second: "Sin which clings so closely."

The Greek word here is *euperistatos*. It means "easily entangling" or "skilfully surrounding." It's a picture of a garment that wraps around you, trips you up, tangles your feet.

Sin clings. It doesn't stand at a distance. It doesn't wave politely from across the room. It wraps itself around you. It gets comfortable. It becomes familiar. It starts to feel like part of your skin.

And that's exactly why you can't cuddle it.

Because the sin that clings is the sin that kills. Not immediately. Slowly. Like a snake that wraps a little tighter every time you breathe out. You don't even notice you're being suffocated until you can't breathe at all.

The Father sees the snake. He sees it wrapping around your chest. He sees you petting its head, calling it your "struggle," telling yourself you have it under control.

And He reaches for the knife.

What Sin Are You Cuddling?

Let me name a few. Not to shame you. To wake you up.

Sexual sin.

You're looking at pornography. Not every day. Just when you're stressed. Just when you're lonely. Just when your spouse isn't in the mood. Just when you're traveling. Just when you can't sleep.

You've convinced yourself it's not that bad. Everyone struggles with this. It's just biology. It's just a coping mechanism. At least you're not having an affair.

But you are having an affair. Just not with a person. With a screen. With pixels. With a fantasy. You're giving to a image what belongs to your spouse. You're training your brain to find satisfaction outside of God's design. You're feeding a fire that will eventually burn your marriage to the ground.

And you're cuddling it. Calling it a "struggle." Telling yourself you'll stop tomorrow. Downloading accountability software and then finding ways around it. Confessing to your small group and then doing it again the same night.

The Father sees the snake. It's wrapped around your chest. You can't breathe.

He's reaching for the knife.

Gossip.

You don't call it gossip. You call it "sharing a prayer request." You call it "processing." You call it "venting." You call it "asking for advice."

But here's the test. Would you say it if the person were in the room? Would you say it if they were listening? Would you say it if Jesus were sitting next to you, taking notes?

No. You wouldn't. Because it's gossip. It's tearing down someone who isn't there to defend themselves. It's feeding your ego by exposing someone else's failure. It's building alliances by sharing secrets that aren't yours to share.

Proverbs 18:8 says, *"The words of a whisperer are like delicious morsels; they go down into the inner parts of the body."*

Gossip tastes good. That's why you keep eating it. That's why you keep serving it to your friends. That's why you look forward to coffee with that one person who always has the latest dirt.

It's a delicious morsel. And it's killing you.

The Father sees the snake. It's wrapped around your tongue.

He's reaching for the knife.

Anger.

You don't call it anger. You call it "righteous indignation." You call it "being passionate." You call it "having strong convictions." You call it "not putting up with nonsense."

But here's the truth. You explode at your kids. You seethe at your spouse. You rage at drivers who cut you off. You unleash on customer service representatives. You fume about politicians. You write scathing comments on the internet.

And you justify it. *They deserved it. Someone had to say it. I'm just being honest. The Bible says be angry and do not sin, so anger can't be that bad.*

But the Bible also says, *"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."* (Ephesians 4:31)

Not managed. Not redirected. Not expressed appropriately. *Put away.*

The Father doesn't want you to have better anger management. He wants you to have no anger. He wants the snake cut out.

But you're cuddling it. You like the rush. You like the feeling of power. You like watching other people flinch when you raise your voice.

The Father sees the snake. It's wrapped around your throat.

He's reaching for the knife.

Greed.

You don't call it greed. You call it "stewardship." You call it "being responsible." You call it "providing for your family." You call it "not being wasteful."

But here's the truth. You have more than enough. You have savings. You have investments. You have a house with rooms you never use. You have a closet full of clothes you never wear. You have a garage full of things you forgot you owned.

And you give almost nothing away.

Not because you're poor. Because you're greedy. Because you trust your 401(k) more than you trust God. Because the thought of writing a check that actually hurts makes you feel sick. Because you're building a kingdom of stuff and calling it wisdom.

Jesus said, *"Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys."* (Luke 12:33)

Not "consider selling." Not "pray about giving." *Sell. Give.*

But you can't. Because you're cuddling the snake of greed. It's wrapped around your wallet. Around your retirement account. Around your dream of early retirement and a beach house and leaving an inheritance for your grandchildren.

The Father sees the snake.

He's reaching for the knife.

Pride.

You don't call it pride. You call it "confidence." You call it "knowing your worth." You call it "not being a doormat." You call it "having standards."

But here's the truth. You can't stand being wrong. You can't stand being corrected. You can't stand being overlooked. You need credit. You need recognition. You need people to know what you've accomplished.

You compare yourself to others and feel superior. Or you compare yourself to others and feel inferior, which is just pride in reverse. Either way, it's all about you. Your reputation. Your legacy. Your name.

Proverbs 16:18: *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."*

Not before a gentle correction. Before *destruction*.

Pride is the snake that ate the garden. It's the original sin. It's the one that turns angels into demons and pastors into predators. And you're cuddling it like a pet.

The Father sees the snake. It's wrapped around your heart.

He's reaching for the knife.

Why You Won't Let Go

Here's the honest question. Why do you keep cuddling your sin?

I'll tell you why. Because it works.

Not in the long run. But right now. In this moment. Your sin is serving a purpose. It's meeting a need. It's solving a problem. It's giving you something you think you can't live without.

Pornography gives you escape from loneliness.

Gossip gives you connection through shared contempt.

Anger gives you a sense of control.

Greed gives you a feeling of security.

Pride gives you a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Your sin is not just bad behaviour. It's a false saviour. It's a counterfeit Christ. It's a promise of life that delivers death.

And you won't let it go because you don't believe God can give you something better.

That's the real issue. It's not that you love your sin too much. It's that you love God too little. You don't trust Him to satisfy you. You don't believe His promises. You think He's holding out on you. You think the fruit He offers is inferior to the garbage you're eating.

So you cuddle the snake. Because at least the snake is here. At least the snake is warm. At least the snake gives you something.

Even as it squeezes the life out of you.

What the Knife Does

The Father doesn't just want you to stop sinning. He wants you to stop wanting to sin.

That's the difference between behaviour modification and transformation. Behaviour modification says, "I'll stop looking at porn." Transformation says, "I don't want to look at porn anymore because I've tasted something better."

The knife is how transformation happens.

When the Father cuts away your sin, He's not just removing bad behaviour. He's exposing the false promise. He's showing you that the thing you thought would satisfy actually leaves you empty. He's letting you feel the pain of your sin so that you'll stop running back to it.

This is why pruning hurts so much.

Because the Father doesn't just cut the branch. He cuts *into* the branch. He cuts where it's alive. He cuts where it's sensitive. He cuts where the sap is flowing.

He cuts your sin at the root.

And the root is not your behaviour. The root is your belief. The root is the lie you've been believing about God and about yourself and about what will make you happy.

The knife cuts the lie.

And that hurts. Because you've been living inside that lie for years. It's become part of you. It's shaped your habits, your relationships, your sense of identity. Cutting it out feels like dying.

That's the point.

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

Crucifixion is not a metaphor for personal growth. It's a method of execution. It's slow. It's painful. It's public. It's humiliating.

And it's the only way to kill the snake.

A Testimony from the Knife

I have to pause here and tell you something personal.

I had a sin I cuddled for years. I won't name it because I don't want to give you an excuse to compare sins. But it was real. It was destructive. It was hidden.

I called it a "struggle." I told myself I was "working on it." I confessed it to God every night and then did it again the next day. I went to counselling. I read books. I joined groups.

And nothing changed.

Because I was still cuddling it. I hadn't given it to the Father. I had given Him my guilt, but not the sin itself. I was asking Him to forgive me without asking Him to change me. I was praying for mercy while refusing surgery.

Then the knife came.

It didn't come the way I expected. No lightning bolt. No dramatic confrontation. Just a slow, relentless series of circumstances that exposed my sin for what it was. Shame. Consequences. Broken trust. A growing awareness that I was becoming someone I didn't want to be.

The Father cut.

And it hurt. It hurt so badly that I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I couldn't look at myself in the mirror.

But He didn't stop cutting. He kept going. Deeper. Past the behaviour. Past the habits. Past the coping mechanisms. Down to the root.

And the root was a lie. A lie I had believed since childhood. A lie about what I needed to be happy. A lie about what God was holding back from me.

When the knife finally cut that lie, I didn't just stop sinning. I stopped wanting to sin. The thing I had chased for years suddenly looked disgusting. Not because I had more willpower. Because the lie was dead.

I'm not telling you this to impress you. I'm telling you this to give you hope.

The knife that cuts is the knife that heals. The pain that breaks you is the pain that remakes you. The death of your sin is the birth of your freedom.

But you have to stop cuddling first.

What to Do Right Now

If you're still reading this, you're probably one of two people.

The first: You know exactly what sin you've been cuddling. You've known for years. You've tried to stop. You've failed. You've given up. You've decided this is just who you are.

Here's what you need to do.

Stop calling it a struggle. Call it sin. Call it rebellion. Call it idolatry. Call it what it is. Name the snake.

Then take it to the Father. Not with a prayer that asks Him to bless your plan to get better. With a prayer that says, "I can't cut this myself. I've tried. I've failed. I'm handing You the knife."

And then let Him cut.

It will hurt. You will bleed. You will want to grab the knife back. Don't. Let Him finish the surgery.

The second: You're not sure what sin you've been cuddling. You think you're basically fine. You're not perfect, but you're not hiding any big, obvious sins. You go to church. You read your Bible. You try to be a good person.

Here's what you need to do.

Ask the Father to show you. Pray the prayer that scares you: *"Lord, what am I cuddling?"*

And then wait. He will answer. He will show you the weight you've been carrying. He will reveal the sin that clings so closely. He will expose the snake you didn't even know was wrapped around you.

It will hurt. You will feel exposed. You will want to look away.

Don't. Let Him show you. Because He doesn't show you to condemn you. He shows you to save you.

The Promise at the End of the Knife

Here's what I want you to know.

The Father does not cut for the sake of cutting. He cuts for the sake of fruit.

Yes, He cuts away sin. Yes, He cuts away the lies. Yes, He cuts away the false saviours.

But He doesn't leave you empty. He fills you with Himself.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." (Matthew 5:6)

Not "they shall be disciplined." Not "they shall be pruned." *Satisfied.*

The end of the knife is satisfaction. Not the cheap satisfaction of sin that leaves you empty an hour later. The deep, lasting, soul-filling satisfaction of knowing Christ and being known by Him.

You've been cuddling a snake because you're hungry. You're starving. And the snake feels like food.

But it's not food. It's poison.

The Father wants to give you bread. Real bread. The Bread of Life. Himself.

But He can't feed you while you're holding the snake. Your hands are full. Your mouth is full. Your heart is full of poison.

So He brings the knife.

Not to hurt you. To empty you. To make room.

Will you let Him?

Chapter 5:

Good Things You Turned Into Gods

Let me tell you about the most dangerous kind of sin.

Not the ugly sins. The ones that look like sin. The ones that smell like sin. The ones that announce themselves with sirens and flashing lights. Adultery. Theft. Addiction. Violence.

Those sins are dangerous, yes. But they're not the most dangerous.

The most dangerous sin is the one that wears a mask. The one that shows up dressed in Sunday clothes. The one that quotes Scripture. The one that sings worship songs. The one that volunteers in the nursery and teaches the youth group and leads the small group and prays the prayers at the church potluck.

The sin of turning good things into gods.

This is the sin that killed the Pharisees. They weren't bad people. They were the best people. They were the most religious, most devoted, most disciplined people in Israel. They prayed. They fasted. They studied Scripture. They tithed down to the last seed in their spice rack.

And Jesus looked at them and said, *"You are of your father the devil."* (John 8:44)

Not because they were doing bad things. Because they had taken good things—Scripture, prayer, fasting, tithing, religious devotion—and turned them into idols. They worshiped the gifts instead of the Giver. They loved the system more than the Saviour. They used God's Word to avoid God Himself.

And Jesus called them children of the devil.

That should terrify you.

Because you've done the same thing. You've taken good things—wonderful things, biblical things, holy things—and you've turned them into gods. You've taken the gifts and worshiped them. You've taken the blessings and clutched them so tightly that your hands have no room left for the Blessor.

And the Father is coming with the knife.

Not because the things are bad. Because the gods are false.

The Isaac Problem

Genesis 22 is one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible.

Abraham. His son. A mountain. A knife. A ram.

God says, *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering."* (Genesis 22:2)

Read that again. *Your son. Your only son. Whom you love.*

God didn't say, "Take your troublesome nephew." He didn't say, "Take that annoying neighbour." He said, *Take the son you love. The son I promised you. The son you waited twenty-five years for. The son who is the fulfilment of every dream I ever gave you.*

Take him. And kill him.

And Abraham went.

He didn't argue. He didn't negotiate. He didn't ask for a Zoom call to discuss alternative options. He got up early the next morning, saddled his donkey, and headed for the mountain.

That's either the greatest faith in history or the most terrifying obedience ever recorded.

But here's what I want you to see.

Isaac was not evil. Isaac was not sinful. Isaac was not a bad son or a rebellious child or a disappointment to his father.

Isaac was a good thing. The best thing. The thing Abraham had prayed for, longed for, wept over, rejoiced in.

And God asked Abraham to sacrifice him.

Why?

Because Isaac had become an idol.

Not because Abraham loved Isaac too much in the abstract. Because Abraham loved Isaac *more than God*. Isaac had become the centre of Abraham's world.

The promise had become more important than the Promiser. The gift had eclipsed the Giver.

And the only way to save Abraham's soul was to put the knife to the thing he loved most.

God didn't want Isaac dead. He wanted the idol dead. He wanted Abraham's heart back. He wanted Abraham to love Him more than he loved the gift.

So He brought the knife.

And Abraham, trembling, held it over his son.

And God stopped him. *"Do not lay your hand on the boy."* (Genesis 22:12)

The knife didn't fall on Isaac. But it cut deep into Abraham's heart. And Abraham learned what he could never have learned any other way: God, not Isaac, was his ultimate treasure.

That's what the knife does to good things that become gods.

It doesn't always remove the thing. Sometimes it removes our grip on the thing. Sometimes it cuts the cords of attachment while leaving the object intact. Sometimes it lets us keep Isaac but kills the Isaac-shaped idol in our hearts.

But sometimes the knife does remove the thing. Sometimes the Father takes Isaac. Sometimes the good thing you've turned into a god is carried up the mountain and never comes back down.

Not because God is cruel. Because He is jealous. And He will not share His glory with another.

The Idol Factory: How Good Things Become Gods

You have an idol factory in your heart. We all do. It churns out gods twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, using whatever raw materials are available.

A promotion at work? Idol factory says: *This will finally make you feel significant.*

A romantic relationship? Idol factory says: *This person will complete you.*

A healthy body? Idol factory says: *If you look good enough, you'll finally feel good enough.*

Financial security? Idol factory says: *If you have enough saved, you won't have to trust God anymore.*

Your children's success? Idol factory says: *Their achievements will prove you're a good parent.*

Your ministry's growth? Idol factory says: *Bigger numbers mean God's approval.*

Your reputation? Idol factory says: *If people think well of you, you can finally think well of yourself.*

None of these things are bad. Promotions are fine. Relationships are good. Health is a blessing. Financial security is wise. Children's success is wonderful. Ministry growth is beautiful. Reputation matters.

But the moment you need any of these things to be happy—the moment you can't imagine life without them—the moment you derive your identity, security, or worth from them—they become gods.

And the Father will not tolerate rivals.

Your Relationship Idol

Let me talk to the single person first.

You want to be married. That's not wrong. God said, *"It is not good that the man should be alone."* (Genesis 2:18) Marriage is good. Companionship is good. Sex is good. Family is good.

But you've turned marriage into an idol.

You obsess over it. You scroll dating apps for hours. You analyse every text message. You rehearse conversations in your head. You measure your worth by whether you're in a relationship. You've built an entire identity around being single, waiting for the day when you'll finally be complete.

Here's the hard truth. Marriage won't complete you. It will expose you. It will reveal the holes in your soul that you thought another person could fill.

And when your spouse fails to be your saviour—because only Jesus is Saviour—you will be more empty than before.

The Father wants to cut your relationship idol.

That might mean a season of enforced singleness. It might mean the breakup you didn't want. It might mean watching your friends get married while you sit alone on Saturday nights.

That's the knife. It hurts. But it's killing the idol that says, "If I just had a spouse, I'd be happy."

And when the idol is dead, you might get married. Or you might not. But either way, you'll be free. Because your joy won't depend on a ring. It will depend on the One who never leaves and never fails.

Now let me talk to the married person.

You love your spouse. Good. You should. The Bible says husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church. That's a high, holy, demanding love.

But you've turned your spouse into an idol.

You need their approval. You can't function without their affection. You've built your entire emotional life around their moods. When they're happy, you're happy. When they're distant, you fall apart.

Or maybe it's the opposite. You've turned your children into idols. Their sports achievements. Their college acceptances. Their Instagram-worthy family photos. You've built a shrine to your parenting success, and you're sacrificing your marriage, your sanity, and your relationship with God on its altar.

The Father wants to cut.

That might mean conflict in your marriage. It might mean a child who rebels. It might mean the cancer diagnosis that reminds you that your family is not eternal. It might mean the death of the dream you had for your children's futures.

The knife hurts. But it's killing the idol that whispers, "Your spouse is your saviour" or "Your children are your legacy."

And when the idol is dead, you can actually love your family. Not as a god to be worshiped. As a gift to be enjoyed. That's the difference between idolatry and love.

Idolatry clings. Love releases. Idolatry demands. Love serves. Idolatry panics at loss. Love trusts the Giver even when the gift is taken.

Your Career Idol

You work hard. That's not wrong. The Bible says, *"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."* (Colossians 3:23)

But you've turned your career into an idol.

You check email at dinner. You work on vacation. You think about projects when you should be praying. You measure your worth by your title, your salary, your office size, your LinkedIn endorsements.

You've told yourself that you're working to provide for your family. But your family doesn't see you. You're providing money while withholding presence. You're buying things while selling your soul.

Or maybe you're not successful yet. Maybe you're climbing. And the climbing has become your life. Every rejection stabs you. Every closed door feels like God's rejection. You've convinced yourself that the next promotion, the next job, the next city will finally be the one that makes you feel like you've arrived.

It won't.

There's always another rung on the ladder. Always another title you don't have. Always another person ahead of you. The idol of career is a hunger that grows by feeding. The more you achieve, the more you need to achieve to feel the same rush.

The Father wants to cut.

That might mean a demotion. A firing. A failed business. A recession that wipes out your savings. A health crisis that forces you to stop. A competitor who gets the promotion you deserved.

The knife hurts. But it's killing the idol that says, "What I do is who I am."

And when the idol is dead, you can work again. Not to prove yourself. Not to earn God's favour. Not to feel significant. Just to work. As an act of worship. With open hands. Knowing that your identity is not in your job title but in your union with Christ.

Your Ministry Idol

This one is for the church people. The leaders. The volunteers. The ones who are "on fire for God."

You serve. That's good. The Bible says, *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another."* (1 Peter 4:10)

But you've turned ministry into an idol.

You need people to need you. You measure your spiritual maturity by your calendar. If you're not busy for God, you feel guilty. You've built an entire identity around being "the one who does things."

You get your approval from the stage. From the platform. From the thank-you notes. From the Instagram comments. From the number of people who show up to your event.

Or maybe you're not in leadership. Maybe you're in the pew. And you've turned your criticism of the ministry into an idol. You know exactly what the pastor is doing wrong. You have opinions about the worship music, the children's program, the budget, the building. Your identity is "the discerning one," but really you're just a bitter consumer who has mistaken cynicism for wisdom.

The Father wants to cut.

That might mean taking you off the platform. It might mean closing the ministry you built. It might mean moving you to a church where nobody knows your name. It might mean a season of silence where you have nothing to offer and no one to impress.

The knife hurts. But it's killing the idol that says, "My usefulness to God is the measure of His love for me."

And when the idol is dead, you can serve again. Not to be seen. Not to earn approval. Not to feel important. Just to serve. Because Jesus washed feet. And He didn't check Instagram afterward to see who noticed.

Your Comfort Idol

This one is subtle. It doesn't look like an idol. It looks like common sense.

You like comfort. So does everyone. Warm beds. Hot coffee. Climate control. Soft lighting. Predictable schedules. A little money in the bank. A little food in the fridge. A little peace and quiet.

None of that is wrong.

But you've turned comfort into an idol. You make decisions based on what's easiest. You avoid hard conversations. You stay in the safe job. You go to the comfortable church. You hang out with people who agree with you. You pray for God to remove obstacles instead of asking Him to make you strong enough to climb over them.

You've built a life that insulates you from suffering. And in doing so, you've insulated yourself from God. Because God shows up in the hard places. The burning bush wasn't in the comfortable part of the desert. The cross wasn't on a pillow.

The Father wants to cut.

That might mean financial hardship. It might mean a move you didn't want. It might mean a church that stops being comfortable. It might mean a season of loneliness, uncertainty, chaos, or pain.

The knife hurts. But it's killing the idol that says, "My comfort is more important than my character."

And when the idol is dead, you can actually follow Jesus. Because Jesus said, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* (Matthew 16:24)

Not "take up his memory foam mattress." His cross. Which is not comfortable. Which is not safe. Which is not predictable.

Which is where you find Him.

How to Spot Your Idols

You might be reading this and thinking, "I don't have idols. I love Jesus. I go to church. I read my Bible."

Let me give you three diagnostic questions. Answer them honestly.

Question One: What do you worry about?

Worry is a thermometer for idolatry. What you worry about losing is what you worship.

If you worry about money, money is your god.

If you worry about your children's success, your children are your gods.

If you worry about your reputation, approval is your god.

If you worry about your health, physical life is your god.

If you worry about being single, marriage is your god.

If you worry about your ministry's growth, numbers are your god.

Jesus said, *"Do not be anxious about your life."* (Matthew 6:25) Not because anxiety is a bad habit. Because anxiety is idolatry. It's the worship of something you're afraid to lose.

Question Two: What do you daydream about?

Your fantasies reveal your gods.

If you daydream about wealth, money is your god.

If you daydream about revenge, justice is your god.

If you daydream about a relationship, romance is your god.

If you daydream about retirement, comfort is your god.

If you daydream about being famous, applause is your god.

What do you think about when your mind wanders? That's your altar. That's where you're worshiping.

Question Three: What makes you angrier than anything else?

Your anger exposes your idols.

If you're furious when someone touches your stuff, possessions are your god.

If you're enraged when you're disrespected, reputation is your god.

If you're livid when your plans change, control is your god.

If you're boiling when your favourite politician loses, politics is your god.

The things that make you angriest are the things you've built your life around. When those things are threatened, you react like a worshiper whose temple has been defiled. Because that's exactly what's happening.

What the Knife Does to Idols

The Father doesn't just want you to stop worshiping idols. He wants you to stop wanting to worship idols.

That's why He brings the knife.

He cuts away the idol. Sometimes by removing the thing itself. Sometimes by removing your attachment to the thing. Sometimes by letting the thing fail you so spectacularly that you finally see it for what it is: a false god that cannot save.

Either way, it hurts.

Because your idols aren't just ideas. They're investments. You've poured your time, your money, your emotions, your identity into them. You've built your life around them. Cutting them out feels like cutting off a limb.

But here's what you need to understand.

The idol is not your friend. It is your slave master. It is a parasite that has been feeding on your soul. It has promised you life and given you death. It has promised you freedom and given you chains. It has promised you satisfaction and left you empty.

The knife is not your enemy. The knife is your rescue.

When the Father cuts away your relationship idol, He's not stealing your happiness. He's saving you from a lifetime of demanding that a mere human being be your god. No human can bear that weight. You would have crushed them. Or they would have crushed you.

When the Father cuts away your career idol, He's not stealing your success. He's saving you from a lifetime of climbing ladders that lean against the wrong walls. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?

When the Father cuts away your comfort idol, He's not stealing your peace. He's saving you from a soft, weak, useless life. The most wasted life is the one spent entirely in the safe zone.

The knife is love.

Not soft love. Not sentimental love. Not the love that nods along while you destroy yourself.

Surgical love. The love that cuts out the cancer because it wants you to live.

Abraham's Test, Your Test

Abraham went up that mountain with a knife in his hand and an idol in his heart.

He came down with neither.

The idol was dead. The knife was no longer needed. And Abraham had something he had never had before: a God he could trust with everything.

That's what the knife does.

It kills the idol. It removes the need for further cutting. And it gives you a deeper, richer, more secure relationship with the God who loves you enough to cut.

What's your Isaac?

What's the good thing you've turned into a god?

What's the thing you're clutching so tightly that your knuckles are white?

The Father is asking for it. Not because He's mean. Because He's jealous. Because He loves you. Because He knows that the thing you're holding is the thing that's holding you back.

Will you go up the mountain?

Will you lay your Isaac on the altar?

Will you hold the knife over the thing you love most and say, "The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord"?

Or will you keep cuddling your idol, pretending it's not a god, telling yourself that your attachment is normal, that everyone does it, that God understands?

He does understand. That's why He's bringing the knife.

Not to hurt you. To free you.

Let Him cut.

Chapter 6:

Your Ego and Your Easy Button

I need to tell you about the most embarrassing prayer I ever prayed.

I was twenty-six. Newly married. Newly in ministry. Newly convinced that I was going to change the world for Jesus. I had the passion. I had the Bible knowledge. I had the platform shoes—okay, not platform shoes, but I had the confidence.

And I had a problem.

I was arrogant. Not in an obvious way. I didn't go around telling people I was better than them. But deep down, in the places only God could see, I was absolutely certain that I had what it took. I was gifted. I was called. I was anointed. I was going to be somebody.

So I prayed a prayer that I now recognize as one of the stupidest prayers in the history of prayer.

I said, "God, use me."

Sounds spiritual, right? Sounds humble? Sounds like the kind of prayer every pastor tells you to pray?

It was none of those things.

Here's what I was really saying: "God, get in line behind my ambitions. I have plans. I have dreams. I have a five-year strategy. You're the secret sauce that makes it all work. So bless my agenda. Anoint my efforts. Amplify my voice. And please don't do anything that messes up my timeline."

God, being God, answered my prayer.

Just not the way I wanted.

He started pruning my ego. And He used the most effective tool in His workshop: failure.

Not the kind of failure that makes for a good sermon illustration. The kind that makes you want to crawl under the covers and never come out. The kind that makes you question whether you're called at all.

The kind that strips away every illusion of self-sufficiency and leaves you face-down on the floor, wondering if God has abandoned you.

That was His answer to "use me."

He said, "I will use you. But first, I have to break you."

The Thorn That Won't Be Removed

Let me introduce you to the patron saint of pruned egos.

The Apostle Paul.

If anyone had a right to be confident in his own abilities, it was Paul. He had the credentials. The education. The pedigree. The zeal. The revelation. He had seen Jesus with his own eyes. He had been caught up to the third heaven. He had heard things that cannot be told.

He was, by any measure, the most qualified Christian in history.

And God gave him a thorn.

We don't know exactly what it was. A physical ailment. A spiritual attack. A persistent temptation. A rival who wouldn't stop causing trouble. Paul doesn't specify, and that's probably intentional. Whatever your thorn is, Paul's thorn is enough like it that you can relate.

Here's what we know. It was painful. It was humiliating. It was persistent. And it was from God.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12:7-8: *"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me."*

Notice the language. *Given* to him. Not allowed. Not permitted. *Given*. As in, God proactively, intentionally, surgically inserted a thorn into Paul's flesh.

And why? *To keep me from becoming conceited.*

Paul had a revelation problem. He had seen too much. He had experienced too much. He was in danger of thinking he was special. Of thinking he had arrived. Of thinking he didn't need to depend on God anymore.

So God gave him a thorn. Something that would keep him humble. Something that would remind him, every single day, that he was not self-sufficient. Something that would force him to his knees.

Paul hated it. He begged God to remove it.

Three times. Not a casual "if it's your will" prayer. A desperate, agonizing, "please take this away" prayer.

And God said no.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Not "I'll take it away next week." Not "I'll make it less painful." Not "Here's a coping strategy."

No.

"My grace is sufficient." Meaning: the thorn stays. The weakness remains. The humiliation continues. But my grace will be enough for you. In fact, my grace will show up best when you're at your worst. My power will be most visible when you're least capable.

Paul's response? *"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."*

He stopped begging for the easy button. He stopped demanding that God remove the thorn. He stopped trying to be self-sufficient.

He embraced the pruning.

And he became the most effective Christian in history.

Not despite the thorn. Because of it.

The Easy Button Lie

You've been sold a lie.

The lie says: If you follow God, life gets easier. If you pray enough, problems go away. If you have enough faith, the thorn gets removed. If you're really walking in victory, you won't have weaknesses anymore.

That lie has destroyed more Christians than any persecution ever could.

Because when life gets hard—when the thorn doesn't go away—when God says no to your desperate prayers—you conclude that something is wrong. You must not have enough faith. You must be in sin. You must be doing something wrong.

So you try harder. You pray more. You fast. You confess. You rebuke the devil. You claim victory. You speak the blood. You do all the things the prosperity preachers told you to do.

And the thorn stays.

Because the thorn is not a mistake. It's not an attack. It's not a lack of faith.

It's pruning.

The easy button is not coming. There is no easy button. There never was.

The Christian life is not a path of increasing comfort. It's a path of increasing weakness. Not weakness in the sense of sin or defeat. Weakness in the sense of dependence. The longer you follow Jesus, the more you realize you can't do any of this on your own. The more you grow, the more you see how much you need grace. The more fruit you bear, the more you understand that you're just a branch, and the vine is everything.

That's not a bug. That's a feature.

Paul didn't become strong by overcoming his weakness. He became strong by embracing his weakness. He stopped pretending he had it all together. He stopped acting like he didn't need help. He stopped trying to impress people with his spiritual resume.

He said, "I am weak. And that's okay. Because when I'm weak, Jesus shows up."

What Your Thorn Is Teaching You

Let me ask you a question.

What's your thorn?

What's the thing you've been begging God to remove?

The health issue that won't go away. The financial pressure that never lets up. The family member who drives you crazy. The sin pattern you can't seem to break. The loneliness that lingers despite your prayers. The disappointment that keeps resurfacing. The limitation you were born with. The failure that follows you like a shadow.

You've prayed. You've pleaded. You've claimed. You've declared. You've had others pray. You've been anointed with oil. You've done everything the books and podcasts and conferences told you to do.

And the thorn remains.

Why?

Because God is not ignoring you. He's answering you. The answer is no. And the no is not rejection. It's pruning.

Here's what the thorn is teaching you.

It's teaching you that you're not God.

You think you're in control. You think you can manage your life. You think you can handle things if you just try hard enough.

The thorn says: No, you can't. You're not the master of your destiny. You're not the captain of your soul. You're a dependent creature who needs grace every second of every day.

That's humbling. It's also freeing. Because when you stop pretending to be God, you can stop carrying the weight of the universe on your shoulders.

It's teaching you that grace is real.

You've heard about grace your whole life. Amazing grace. Sufficient grace. Grace upon grace.

But you've never really needed it. Because you've been coasting on your own strength. You've been getting by on your own abilities. You've been managing your life without desperate, clinging, life-or-death dependence on God.

The thorn changes that. When you can't fix yourself, you have to rely on grace. And grace shows up. Not as a theory. As a lifeline. As breath in your lungs when you thought you were drowning. As strength when you had nothing left.

You wouldn't trade that for a thousand removed thorns.

It's teaching you that power looks different than you thought.

You thought power was strength. Muscle. Ability. Success. Influence. The ability to make things happen.

God's power looks like weakness. A cross. A tomb. A crucified Messiah. A man who looked like a failure and saved the world.

Your thorn is making you look like a failure. To yourself. To others. To the people who expected you to have it all together.

That's exactly where God's power shows up. When you can't perform anymore. When you can't pretend anymore. When you're too weak to even raise your hands in worship.

That's when the power of Christ rests on you. Not when you're strong. When you're weak.

It's teaching you that your value is not in your performance.

You've been measuring your worth by your output. What you produce. What you achieve. What you contribute.

The thorn shuts down production. It forces you to stop doing and just be. To be loved. To be held. To be enough without doing anything.

That's terrifying for achievers. It's also the gospel. Your value is not in what you do. Your value is in whose you are. You are a child of God. Not because of your performance. Because of His grace.

The thorn is the thing that finally forces you to believe that.

The Pride Beneath the Prayer

Here's what I realized about my "God, use me" prayer.

It was pride disguised as piety.

I wasn't asking God to use me however He wanted. I was asking God to use me in the way I wanted. I had a vision. I had a plan. I had a five-year strategy. I wanted God to bless my ambition, not redirect it.

The thorn exposed that.

When God didn't answer my prayer the way I wanted, I got angry. I got confused. I got discouraged. I wondered if I had missed God's will.

No. I had missed God's method.

God's method is not to remove obstacles. It's to use obstacles. Not to eliminate weakness. It's to perfect power through weakness. Not to give you an easy button. It's to give you Himself.

The thorn is not the enemy of your calling. It is the pathway to your calling.

Paul didn't become the apostle to the Gentiles because God removed his thorn. He became the apostle to the Gentiles because God left the thorn in place. Every day, Paul was reminded that he was not sufficient. Every day, he had to depend on grace. Every day, he learned that weakness was not a liability but an asset.

And that made him unstoppable.

Not because he was strong. Because he was weak. And the power of Christ rested on him.

What the Easy Button Would Cost You

You want God to remove the thorn. I get it. I've wanted the same thing a thousand times.

But have you considered what the easy button would cost you?

If God removed your thorn, you would become self-sufficient again. You would stop praying. You would stop depending. You would stop clinging to grace. You would drift back into the illusion that you've got this.

The thorn keeps you close. It's the fence that keeps you in the pasture. It's the leash that keeps you from running into traffic. It's the pain that reminds you that you need a Physician.

If God gave you the easy button, you would miss the very thing you're asking for. You want to be used by God? You want to bear fruit? You want to make a difference?

Then you need the thorn.

Because the thorn is what makes you useful. The thorn is what keeps you dependent. The thorn is what drives you to prayer. The thorn is what gives you a testimony. The thorn is what makes you relatable to other suffering people. The thorn is what strips away your confidence in the flesh and forces you to trust in God alone.

The easy button would ruin you.

So God, in His mercy, says no.

A Catalogue of Thorns

Let me name some common thorns. Maybe yours is here.

The chronic illness.

You've been sick for years. Maybe it's invisible. Maybe people don't believe you're really suffering. Maybe you've stopped talking about it because you're tired of the platitudes. "Just have faith." "I'm believing for your healing." "God hasn't forgotten you."

You've prayed. You've been prayed for. You've travelled to healing services. You've done the protocols. And you're still sick.

The thorn remains.

Here's what God might be doing. He's teaching you that your life is not your own. He's giving you a platform of compassion for other sick people. He's slowing you down so you can't run ahead of Him. He's reminding you that your ultimate healing is not in this life but in the next.

Paul didn't get healed. He got grace. And grace was enough.

The family member who won't change.

Your spouse. Your child. Your parent. Your sibling. They're not walking with God. Or they're walking in destructive patterns. Or they've hurt you in ways that can't be undone.

You've prayed for years. Decades. You've begged. You've bargained. You've tried every approach. Nothing changes.

The thorn remains.

Here's what God might be doing. He's teaching you to love without conditions. He's showing you that you can't control other people. He's giving you a front-row seat to His patience. He's preparing you to comfort others with the comfort you've received.

Your family member may change. Or they may not. Either way, God's grace is sufficient for you.

The financial pressure.

You work hard. You're responsible. You tithe. You budget. And still, there's never enough. Something always breaks. An unexpected bill. A medical expense. A car repair. A job loss.

You've prayed for provision. You've claimed promises. You've believed God for breakthrough. And you're still living paycheck to paycheck.

The thorn remains.

Here's what God might be doing. He's teaching you that money is not security. He's giving you a heart for the poor. He's showing you that His provision comes daily, not all at once. He's weaning you from your love of comfort.

You may never be rich. But you will never be abandoned. God's grace is sufficient.

The singleness that won't end.

You want to be married. You've prayed. You've waited. You've prepared your heart. You've put yourself out there. And nothing. Year after year. Watching friends get married. Watching couples at church. Watching families grow.

You've asked God to remove the thorn. To send someone. To answer your prayer.

The thorn remains.

Here's what God might be doing. He's teaching you that He is enough. He's giving you time and energy for ministry that married people don't have. He's protecting you from a bad marriage you would have rushed into. He's preparing you to be the spouse someone needs when the time is right.

You may get married. You may not. Either way, God's grace is sufficient.

The ministry disappointment.

You were called. You were sure of it. You stepped out in faith. You sacrificed. You gave everything. And it didn't work. The church didn't grow. The ministry didn't launch. The doors didn't open. You feel like a failure.

You've asked God to redeem it. To bring fruit from your labour. To show you what went wrong.

The thorn remains.

Here's what God might be doing. He's teaching you that success is not the goal. Faithfulness is. He's showing you that your identity is not in your ministry. It's in Christ. He's pruning away your ambition so that He can use you in a different way later.

Your ministry may never be what you envisioned. But you are still loved. God's grace is sufficient.

Learning to Thank God for the Thorn

This is the hardest part of pruning. Not enduring the thorn. Thanking God for it.

Paul said, *"I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities."*

Not resigned. Content. As in, "This is actually good. I wouldn't trade this for the easy button. The thorn is a gift."

How do you get there?

You get there by seeing what the thorn produces.

The thorn produces dependence. Dependence produces prayer. Prayer produces intimacy. Intimacy produces joy. Joy produces fruit.

The easy button produces self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency produces pride. Pride produces distance from God. Distance produces dryness. Dryness produces death.

The thorn is the path to life. The easy button is the path to death.

So you learn to thank God for the thorn. Not because the thorn feels good. Because the fruit feels good. Not because the pain is enjoyable. Because the presence of Christ that comes in the pain is enjoyable.

You learn to say, "Lord, I don't like this thorn. But I trust You. And if the thorn is what it takes to keep me close to You, then let the thorn stay. I'll stop begging for the easy button. I'll start thanking You for the pruning."

That's not masochism. That's maturity.

The Power of Weakness

Here's the secret that changes everything.

Your weakness is not a problem to be solved. It's a platform for God's power.

You've been treating your weaknesses as enemies. As obstacles. As things to overcome, hide, or fix.

What if they're actually assets? What if your thorn is the very thing that makes you useful? What if your failure is the qualification? What if your inability is the invitation for God to show up?

Think about it.

Who gets the glory when a strong person does something amazing? The strong person. "Look what they accomplished." "Look what they built." "Look what they achieved."

Who gets the glory when a weak person does something amazing? God. "Only God could have done that." "There's no human explanation." "That had to be the Lord."

God is jealous for His glory. He will not share it with another. So He deliberately, intentionally, lovingly keeps you weak. Not because He doesn't love you. Because He loves you too much to let you steal His glory.

Your weakness is not a mistake. It's a design feature.

Paul got it. He stopped apologizing for his weakness. He started boasting about it. Not because he was proud of being weak. Because he realized that his weakness made room for God's strength.

"When I am weak, then I am strong."

Not "when I overcome my weakness." Not "when I turn my weakness into strength." When I *am* weak. In the moment of weakness. In the admission of weakness. In the acceptance of weakness.

That's when strength comes. Not from you. From Him.

A Prayer for the Thorn

Let me give you a different prayer. Not the prayer you've been praying. A better one.

Not: "God, take this away."

But: "God, use this. Use this thorn to kill my pride. Use this weakness to display Your power. Use this pain to drive me to prayer. Use this limitation to make me depend on You. Use this failure to remind me that I'm not God. Use this struggle to make me compassionate toward others. Use this thing I hate to produce the fruit I could never produce on my own."

That's the prayer of a pruned branch. A branch that has stopped fighting the knife. A branch that has stopped demanding the easy button. A branch that has finally accepted that the Vinedresser knows what He's doing.

Will you pray that prayer?

It's scary. Because God will answer it. And the thorn will stay. But the fruit will come.

And in the end, you'll say what Paul said. Not through gritted teeth. Through genuine joy.

"I am content."

Not because the thorn is gone. Because Christ is here. And His grace is sufficient. And His power is perfect in my weakness.

That's the fruit of pruning.

It's worth every cut.

Chapter 7: People You Need to Lose

I need to say something that might get me uninvited from your Thanksgiving dinner.

Not every relationship in your life is from God.

Some of them are from the enemy. Some of them are from your own foolishness. Some of them started with good intentions but have become spiritual anchors dragging you down to the bottom of the sea.

And the Father, in His surgical love, is going to cut them away.

I'm not talking about your enemies. Those are easy. You expect the world to oppose you. Jesus said, *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."* (John 15:18) Persecution from outsiders is normal. Expected. Even blessed.

I'm talking about something much harder.

The relationships that seem good. The people you actually like. The friendships that have history. The family members you love. The romantic relationship you thought was from God. The ministry partnership that started with prayer and tears and visions of revival.

But something shifted. Slowly. Imperceptibly. Like a frog in a pot of water that's being brought to a boil.

They're not pulling you toward Jesus anymore. They're pulling you away. Not obviously. Not with a dramatic announcement that they've renounced the faith. Just a subtle, steady drift. A little less prayer. A little more compromise. A little more tolerance for things that used to bother you. A little less hunger for the Word. A little more comfort with the world.

And you've been telling yourself it's fine. You've been telling yourself that you can handle it. You've been telling yourself that love means staying, even when staying is slowly killing your soul.

The Father sees what you can't see. Or what you refuse to see.

And He's reaching for the knife.

The Theology of Cutting Ties

Let me establish something from Scripture before I go any further.

The Bible is not a book about nice people who never offend anyone. The Bible is a book about holy people who sometimes had to walk away from relationships that were pulling them away from God.

Abraham left his country and his father's household. (Genesis 12:1) Not because his family was evil. Because God said, "Go." And going meant leaving.

Ruth left her people and her gods. (Ruth 1:16) Not because they were bad. Because she had found something better.

Nehemiah cleansed the temple and threw out Tobiah's furniture. (Nehemiah 13:8) Tobiah was not an enemy of Israel. He was a friend. An ally. A business partner. But his stuff didn't belong in God's house.

Paul told the Corinthians: *"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers."* (2 Corinthians 6:14) That's not just about marriage. It's about any binding partnership that compromises your ability to follow Jesus fully.

John wrote: *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works."* (2 John 1:10-11)

That's strong. Don't even say hello. Not because we're mean. Because some relationships are spiritually toxic. And saying hello can be interpreted as endorsement.

Jesus Himself said: *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household."* (Matthew 10:34-36)

Not "peace." A sword. Not harmony. Division. Not unity. A cut.

Why? Because some relationships are incompatible with following Jesus. Not because Jesus is divisive. Because truth is divisive. Light is divisive. Holiness is divisive.

If you're walking toward the light, and someone you love is walking toward the darkness, eventually you will have to choose. You cannot walk in two directions at once.

The Father will not let you stay in a relationship that is slowly killing your soul. He loves you too much.

So He brings the knife.

The Four Types of People You Might Need to Lose

Not every relationship needs to be cut. That would be monasticism, not Christianity. We're called to love our neighbours, serve our families, and live in community with imperfect people.

But some relationships do need to be cut. And the Father's knife is the only thing that can do it.

Let me give you four categories.

Category One: The Openly Unbelieving Partner

This is the most obvious category, so I'll handle it quickly.

If you are a follower of Jesus, and you are in a romantic relationship with someone who is not a follower of Jesus, you are in direct disobedience to Scripture.

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14)

Not "it's okay if they're really nice." Not "they said they might come to church someday." Not "I'll be a good influence on them."

No. The command is clear. Don't do it.

Why? Because the yoke is not a suggestion. A yoke is a wooden beam that connects two animals so they pull together. If one is an ox and one is a donkey, they don't pull together. They pull against each other. They go in circles. They get nowhere.

That's your life if you marry an unbeliever. You'll be pulling toward Jesus. They'll be pulling toward the world. And you'll go in circles. Exhausted. Frustrated. Compromised. Until you either give up or they drag you away from the faith entirely.

I've seen it happen dozens of times. A young woman who loves Jesus meets a nice guy who doesn't. She thinks she'll be his evangelist. She thinks her faith will rub off on him. She thinks love conquers all.

A few years later, she's not going to church anymore. She's not praying anymore. She's not reading her Bible anymore. She's not the person she used to be. Because the donkey pulled the ox off course.

The Father sees this coming. He sees the trajectory. He sees where this road ends.

And He brings the knife. Not because He hates your relationship. Because He loves your soul.

If you're in this situation, you know what you need to do. Stop pretending you don't.

Category Two: The Friend Who Is Pulling You Down

This one is harder because it's not as clear-cut.

You have a friend. Maybe a long-time friend. Maybe someone you grew up with. Maybe someone who was there for you during a hard season.

But they're not pulling you toward Jesus anymore.

At first, it was subtle. A little gossip here. A little complaining there. A little compromise on Sunday mornings. A little eye-rolling at the sermon. A little mockery of the "super religious" people.

Now it's not so subtle. They openly mock your faith. They pressure you to join them in sin. They make you feel foolish for taking the Bible seriously. They laugh at your convictions. They roll their eyes when you say you're going to church.

Or maybe it's not that overt. Maybe it's just a slow drift. You used to pray together. Now you just hang out. You used to encourage each other in the Lord. Now you just talk about sports, work, and the weather. You used to sharpen each other. Now you just entertain each other.

"Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals." (1 Corinthians 15:33)

Not "bad company might influence you." Ruins. Destroys. Corrupts.

You are not strong enough to resist the pull of a close friend who is drifting from God. You think you are. You're not. No one is. The gravitational pull of a person you love is stronger than your willpower. Eventually, you will start to look like them.

The Father sees this. He sees the trajectory. He sees where this road ends.

And He brings the knife.

Not because He wants you to be lonely. Because He wants you to be holy. And holiness sometimes means walking alone for a season rather than walking toward destruction with a crowd.

Category Three: The Family Member Who Is Toxic

This is the hardest one. Because family is family. You didn't choose them. They're blood. And the Bible says to honour your father and mother, to love your family, to care for your relatives.

But the Bible also says to love God more.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26)

That word "hate" is shocking. Jesus doesn't mean literal hatred. He means comparative love. You must love Jesus so much that your love for your family looks like hatred in comparison.

Which means there may come a point where you have to choose. Your family's approval or Jesus. Your family's expectations or Jesus. Your family's demands or Jesus.

I'm not talking about minor disagreements. I'm talking about patterns of control, manipulation, abuse, or spiritual opposition that are destroying your soul.

Maybe your parents mock your faith every time you visit. Maybe your sibling belittles your convictions. Maybe your extended family pressures you to compromise your values for the sake of "family unity."

You've been trying to keep the peace. You've been avoiding conflict. You've been silent when you should have spoken. You've been present when you should have stayed home. You've been absorbing their poison because you didn't want to be the one who caused a scene.

The Father sees what this is doing to you. He sees the slow erosion of your faith. He sees the constant low-grade compromise. He sees the way you come home from family gatherings spiritually depleted, emotionally exhausted, and closer to the edge of abandoning your convictions than you'll admit.

And He brings the knife.

Not because He hates your family. Because He loves you. And He will not let your family steal your soul.

Sometimes the knife means boundaries. Sometimes it means limited contact. Sometimes it means no contact. Sometimes it means moving away. Sometimes it means missing holidays. Sometimes it means being the villain in their story so you can be faithful in God's.

Whatever it means for you, it will hurt. It will cost you. People will not understand. They will call you unloving, unforgiving, extreme.

Let them. Your job is not to manage their opinions. Your job is to follow Jesus. Even if it means walking away from people you love.

Category Four: The "Christian" Who Is Leading You Astray

This is the most deceptive category. Because these people use the right language. They carry the right Bible. They go to the right church. They sing the right songs.

But they are not leading you toward Jesus. They are leading you toward a version of Christianity that is not Christianity at all.

The prosperity gospel preacher who tells you that God wants you rich. The deconstruction influencer who tells you that the Bible isn't really authoritative. The "grace" teacher who tells you that obedience doesn't matter. The politically obsessed pundit who has made an idol out of a party or a candidate. The therapeutic coach who has replaced the gospel with self-esteem.

They sound Christian. They look Christian. But they are wolves in sheep's clothing. (Matthew 7:15)

And you've been listening to them. You've been reading their books. You've been following their podcasts. You've been sitting under their teaching. And slowly, subtly, you've been led astray.

You don't pray as much. You don't read your Bible as much. You don't share your faith as much. You're not as passionate about holiness. You're more comfortable with sin. You're more cynical about the church. You're more tolerant of false teaching.

The Father sees what you can't see. Or what you refuse to see.

And He brings the knife.

Not because He doesn't want you to learn. Because He wants you to learn from the right teachers. The ones who will lead you to the cross, not away from it.

You need to unfollow. Unsubscribe. Unfriend. Stop going to that Bible study. Stop attending that church. Stop listening to that podcast. Stop reading that book.

It will feel like you're being narrow-minded. Intolerant. Judgmental.

Good. Jesus was all of those things. He said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6)

That's narrow. It's intolerant. It's exclusive.

And it's true.

Cut the false teachers out of your life. Before they cut your soul out of the kingdom.

The Test: Is This Relationship Helping or Hurting?

Here's a simple diagnostic test. Ask yourself five questions about any relationship you're unsure about.

Question One: Does this person make me more like Jesus or less like Jesus?

Not "do they believe the right things?" Not "do they go to church?" Not "are they nice?"

Do they actually, measurably, observably help you become more holy? More loving? More prayerful? More obedient? More fruitful?

Or do you leave their presence feeling less like Jesus and more like the world?

Be honest.

Question Two: Do I compromise my convictions when I'm with them?

Are there things you would never do alone that you do with them? Things you would never say, watch, laugh at, or participate in?

If you have to lower your standards to maintain the relationship, the relationship is not from God.

Question Three: Do I hide my faith around them?

Do you talk differently? Act differently? Dress differently? Avoid mentioning church, prayer, or Scripture because you know it will make things awkward?

If you're ashamed of Jesus around someone, that someone is not safe for your soul.

Question Four: Do they respect my boundaries or pressure me to cross them?

Have you told them you don't want to gossip, and they keep bringing gossip to you? Have you told them you don't want to watch certain things, and they keep putting them on? Have you told them you need to prioritize your family, and they keep demanding your time?

Respect for your boundaries is the bare minimum of love. If they won't give you that, they don't love you. They love what you give them.

Question Five: Can I imagine standing before Jesus with this person still in my life?

This is the ultimate test. Picture the judgment seat of Christ. Picture Jesus looking at you, at your life, at your relationships.

Will He say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. I see how you loved that person, even when it cost you"?

Or will He say, "Why did you stay? I sent you warnings. I sent you conviction. I sent you opportunities to leave. Why did you keep choosing them over Me?"

Let that question sit in your chest until it hurts.

What Cutting Ties Looks Like

Let me be practical. Because this is not theoretical. You need to know what the knife looks like when it cuts a relationship.

Sometimes it's a clean cut.

You have a conversation. You say, "I love you, but I can't continue in this relationship because it's pulling me away from Jesus." You set a boundary. You stop communicating. You move on.

It's brutal. It's painful. It's clear.

Sometimes it's a slow fade.

You don't announce anything. You just start saying no. You become less available. You stop initiating contact. You let the relationship die of natural causes.

This is often the kindest way, especially with family members who wouldn't understand a formal announcement.

Sometimes it's a series of boundaries.

You don't cut the person off completely. You just limit the relationship. You see them less often. You don't share certain things. You don't put yourself in vulnerable positions. You love them from a distance.

This is common with parents or adult children where complete separation isn't possible or wise.

Sometimes it's geographical.

You move. Not just to avoid someone, but to create physical space that allows you to breathe and grow. Distance doesn't solve everything, but it helps.

Sometimes it's digital.

You mute, unfriend, unfollow, block. Not out of spite. Out of self-preservation. You don't need their posts in your feed. You don't need their opinions in your head. You don't need their influence in your life.

Sometimes it's financial.

You stop funding their lifestyle. You stop co-signing their debt. You stop being their safety net. Not because you're cruel. Because your money should not be used to subsidize someone else's rebellion.

Whatever it looks like for you, it will be hard. It will cost you. You will second-guess yourself. You will wonder if you're being too harsh. You will hear voices—some from outside, some from inside—telling you to reconcile, to give them another chance, to be more loving.

Here's how you know if you're being too harsh: compare your standard to Scripture.

Scripture says: *"Do not be unequally yoked."*

Scripture says: *"Bad company ruins good morals."*

Scripture says: *"If anyone does not abide in my teaching, do not receive him."*

Scripture says: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."*

If your boundaries are stricter than Scripture, maybe you're being too harsh. But if your boundaries are looser than Scripture, you're being too soft. And being too soft with your soul is not love. It's negligence.

The Loneliness After the Cut

I need to warn you about something.

After the knife cuts, there will be a season of loneliness. Sometimes a long one.

The person you walked away from is gone. The false teacher is silenced. The toxic family member is at a distance. The bad influence is out of your life.

And now you're alone.

Not completely alone. You have God. You have the church. You have true friends who are walking the same direction.

But the silence is loud. The absence is heavy. The empty chair at the table is obvious.

You will be tempted, in that loneliness, to go back. To call them. To text them. To apologize for your boundaries. To pretend the cut never happened. To invite the poison back in because the poison is familiar and the loneliness is not.

Don't.

The loneliness is not a sign that you made a mistake. The loneliness is the space where God grows new things.

"I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her." (Hosea 2:14)

The wilderness is lonely. The wilderness is uncomfortable. The wilderness is where you have nothing to rely on but God.

That's exactly where He wants you. Not isolated forever. But alone with Him long enough to heal. Long enough to learn that He is enough. Long enough to stop needing the toxic relationship that was killing you.

The loneliness will not last forever. God will bring new relationships. He will bring brothers and sisters who love Him and love you. He will bring a spiritual family that sharpens you instead of dulling you.

But first, the wilderness. First, the loneliness. First, the pruning.

Don't run from it. Let the knife do its work.

A Word to the One Who Has Been Cut

Let me switch directions for a moment.

Maybe you're not the one doing the cutting. Maybe you're the one who got cut.

Someone walked away from you. A friend. A family member. A romantic partner. Someone you loved. Someone you thought would be in your life forever.

And they said it was because of Jesus. They said you were pulling them away. They said the relationship was unhealthy. They said they needed boundaries. They said goodbye.

You're angry. You're hurt. You're confused. You think they're being extreme, judgmental, unloving. You think they're misinterpreting Scripture. You think they're going to regret this.

Maybe you're right. Maybe they are being too harsh. Maybe they're using God as an excuse to avoid conflict. Maybe they're the problem, not you. But maybe—just maybe—they're right.

Maybe you have been pulling them away from Jesus. Maybe you haven't been the friend you thought you were. Maybe your influence has been more destructive than you realized. Maybe this cut is God's mercy to them and His wake-up call to you.

I'm not saying that's definitely the case. I don't know your situation.

But I am saying that you should consider it. Pray about it. Ask God, "Is there truth in what they said? Have I been a stumbling block? Is there something I need to repent of?"

Because here's the thing about the knife. It cuts both ways. Sometimes you're the branch being cut away. Sometimes you're the branch being pruned. Sometimes you're the one holding the knife, and sometimes you're the one bleeding.

If you're bleeding today—if someone has cut you out of their life in the name of following Jesus—don't just get angry. Get humble.

Ask God what He's trying to show you.

It might be the most important question you ever ask.

The Promise on the Other Side

I want to end this chapter with hope.

The knife is real. The cuts are painful. The loneliness is hard. The cost is high.

But the promise on the other side is worth it.

Jesus said, *"Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."* (Mark 10:29-30)

A hundredfold. Not in the next life. In this life.

You will get new family. A spiritual family that is closer than blood. A church that loves you like a mother. Friends who would die for you like brothers. A community that sharpens you, challenges you, and carries you.

Not without persecutions. Not without cost. Not without more pruning.

But a hundredfold.

The people you lose for the sake of Jesus are not losses. They're trades. You're trading a counterfeit for the real thing. You're trading a relationship that was slowly killing you for relationships that will help you become who God created you to be.

It doesn't feel like a good trade in the moment. In the moment, it feels like death.

But death is the path to resurrection.

Let the knife cut.

The fruit is coming.

Chapter 8: The Prison Before the Palace

I need to tell you about the most unfair story in the Bible.

Not Job. Job got his stuff back. Not Stephen. Stephen got a vision of heaven and a martyr's crown. Not even Jesus. Jesus chose the cross. He saw it coming. He walked toward it on purpose.

No, I'm talking about Joseph.

Joseph was seventeen years old when his life fell apart. He was a kid. A teenager. He had dreams—literally, God-given dreams—that he would rule over his family. His brothers would bow down to him. His parents would bow down to him.

Was he arrogant about it? Probably. He was seventeen. Seventeen-year-olds are arrogant about everything. But he wasn't lying. The dreams were real. God had spoken.

And his brothers hated him for it.

So they threw him in a pit. Then they sold him into slavery. To Midianites. Strangers. Slave traders. They stood there, counting silver, while their little brother was led away in chains.

Joseph ended up in Egypt. Potiphar's house. He worked hard. He was faithful. He honoured God. And God blessed him. He rose to the top of Potiphar's household. Everything he touched turned to gold.

Then Potiphar's wife lied about him. Joseph refused to sleep with her, so she accused him of rape. No evidence. No witnesses. Just her word against his.

And Joseph went to prison.

For years.

For a crime he didn't commit. For doing the right thing. For honouring God when it would have been easier to compromise.

And there, in that prison, God did not explain Himself. There was no angelic visitation saying, "Hey, sorry about the false accusation. Hang tight for twelve years, and then I'll make you prime minister." There was just the slow, grinding, miserable

passage of time. Stone walls. Iron bars. The smell of sweat and despair. The sound of chains rattling.

Joseph's dreams must have felt like a cruel joke. *You will rule? Look at you. You're a slave. You're a prisoner. You're nothing.*

If Joseph had written Psalm 13, it would have sounded like this: *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"*

But God wasn't hiding. God was pruning.

And without that prison, there would have been no palace.

The Theology of Waiting

Let me say something that might free you or offend you, depending on where you're standing.

Not every delay is a denial. Not every closed door is a "no." Sometimes the closed door is the preparation for the open door you can't even see yet.

We live in an age of instant gratification. Amazon delivers tomorrow. Streaming services have no commercials. Fast food takes three minutes. Same-day shipping. Next-day delivery. Instant downloads.

And we've brought that same mentality to God. We want our prayers answered yesterday. We want our calling fulfilled now. We want our dreams realized immediately. We want the palace without the prison. We want the fruit without the pruning. We want the promotion without the preparation.

But God does not work on Amazon Prime time.

God works on agricultural time. Seasons. Cycles. Growth that cannot be rushed. A seed planted today does not become a tree tomorrow. It takes years. Decades. The tree grows slowly, imperceptibly, while no one is watching. And then, one day, it's strong enough to bear fruit.

Joseph spent thirteen years in slavery and prison before he stood before Pharaoh. Thirteen years. From seventeen to thirty. The prime of his life. Wasted? No. Invested. Invested in the only thing that could prepare him to rule Egypt: humble, hidden, painful obscurity.

You want to rule? You want to lead? You want to bear fruit? You want to be used by God?

Then you need prison time.

Not literal prison, maybe. But hiddenness. Waiting. Suffering. The slow, painful, unglamorous work of character formation when no one is watching, no one is clapping, no one is promoting you, no one even knows your name.

That's the prison. And the prison is not punishment. The prison is preparation.

What the Prison Produces

Let me give you five things that grow in prison. Five things that cannot grow in the palace.

1. Patience

You cannot learn patience in a fast-food drive-through. Patience is learned in waiting rooms. In traffic jams. In hospital beds. In seasons when nothing changes and nothing moves and nothing makes sense.

Joseph learned patience in prison. He couldn't leave. He couldn't speed up the process. He couldn't make anything happen. He had to wait.

And waiting taught him that God's timing is not his timing. That God's ways are not his ways. That God is not late, even when everything feels late.

You're in a waiting season right now. I can feel it. You've been praying for something for years. A spouse. A child. A job. A healing. A breakthrough. And nothing. Silence. The clock keeps ticking. Your friends are getting what you want. You're still waiting.

That's the prison. And the prison is producing patience in you. Not the fake patience of someone who has given up. The real patience of someone who trusts the Vinedresser's timing.

2. Humility

Pride grows in the palace. Humility grows in the prison.

In the palace, you start to believe your own press. You think you're special. You think you deserve success. You think you've earned your position. You forget that every good gift comes from above.

In the prison, you remember. In the prison, you know you can't save yourself. In the prison, you stop pretending to be self-sufficient. In the prison, you cry out to God because there's no one else to cry to.

Joseph was arrogant at seventeen. He told his brothers his dreams in a way that made them want to kill him. He was not humble. He was not ready to lead.

Thirteen years later, when he stood before Pharaoh, he said, *"It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favourable answer."* (Genesis 41:16)

That's humility. That's a man who has been pruned. A man who knows that any success he has comes from God, not from himself.

The prison did that. Not the palace.

Your prison is doing the same thing. It's killing your pride. It's teaching you that you're not the main character. It's showing you that you need God. That's not a loss. That's the greatest gain.

3. Compassion

You cannot learn compassion in comfort. Compassion is learned in suffering.

Joseph suffered. He knew what it felt like to be betrayed, enslaved, imprisoned, forgotten. And because he knew, he could feel for others.

When he was in prison, he noticed that two of his fellow prisoners were sad. He asked them why. He cared about their suffering. Not because he was naturally compassionate. Because his own suffering had opened his eyes to the suffering of others.

Later, when he ruled Egypt and the famine came, Joseph wept when he saw his brothers. He didn't just punish them. He wept. He felt. He forgave.

The prison gave him a heart.

Your prison is doing the same thing. The pain you're feeling right now is not wasted. It's being transformed into compassion. One day, you will meet someone going through what you're going through, and you will be able to comfort them with the comfort you have received. (2 Corinthians 1:4)

That's not a consolation prize. That's a gift. A gift that only the prison can give.

4. Wisdom

You cannot learn wisdom in the fast lane. Wisdom is learned in the slow lane. In failure. In reflection. In the silence between prayers.

Joseph learned wisdom in prison. He learned to wait. He learned to listen. He learned that not every opportunity is from God. He learned that God's timing is perfect, even when it feels late.

When he finally stood before Pharaoh, he didn't just interpret the dream. He gave a seven-year plan. He told Pharaoh exactly what to do. That's wisdom. Not book knowledge. The wisdom that comes from years of suffering and waiting and trusting God.

Your prison is making you wise. Not the wisdom of the world, which is really just cleverness. The wisdom from above, which is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits. (James 3:17)

That wisdom cannot be rushed. It must be grown. In the dark. In the dirt. In the prison.

5. Faith

This is the most important one.

You cannot grow faith in the palace. In the palace, you don't need faith. You can see everything. You can touch everything. You can control everything.

Faith is for the prison. Faith is for the dark. Faith is for the times when you can't see, can't feel, can't understand, and have nothing to hold onto but the promise.

Joseph had a promise. God had given him dreams. But for thirteen years, those dreams looked like lies. Every day in slavery, every night in prison, the promise seemed more and more ridiculous.

But Joseph held on. He didn't let go. He didn't curse God. He didn't abandon his faith. He kept believing that God was faithful, even when nothing made sense.

That's faith. Not the faith that gets you a parking spot. The faith that sustains you in the fire. The faith that says, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him." (Job 13:15)

Your prison is growing that faith in you. Right now. Today. Every morning you wake up and nothing has changed, and you choose to trust God anyway—that's faith. That's the fruit of pruning. That's the treasure that cannot be stolen.

The Stories You Don't Know

Here's something you need to understand.

You only know the end of Joseph's story. You know that he became prime minister. You know that he saved Egypt. You know that his brothers bowed down to him, just like the dreams said.

But Joseph didn't know the end when he was in the middle.

When Joseph was in the pit, he didn't know he would be prime minister. When Joseph was in Potiphar's house, he didn't know he would be falsely accused. When Joseph was in prison, he didn't know he would be there for years. When Joseph was forgotten by the cupbearer, he didn't know that God was still working.

He just trusted. One day at a time. One prayer at a time. One act of obedience at a time.

That's what the prison looks like. Not a dramatic movie where everything makes sense. A slow, grinding, confusing season where you have no idea what God is doing, but you keep showing up anyway.

The same is true for you.

You're in the middle of your story. You don't know how it ends. You don't know how long the prison will last. You don't know what God is doing or why He's taking so long.

But you can trust.

Not because you understand. Because He is faithful. Not because you can see the palace. Because you know the King.

What to Do in the Prison

Let me give you some practical counsel for your time behind bars.

1. Stop trying to escape.

You've been praying for God to get you out of this situation. To open a door. To provide a way of escape. To end the suffering.

Stop.

Not because prayer is bad. Because your prayer is premature. You're asking for the palace when you haven't finished the prison. And if God let you out now, you would be less ready, not more ready. You would fail. You would fall. You would waste the opportunity He's preparing you for.

Instead, pray this: *"God, don't let me waste this prison. If I have to be here, let me grow here. Don't let these years be empty. Use this suffering. Prune me. Prepare me. Make me ready for whatever comes next."*

That's the prayer of a branch that has stopped fighting the knife.

2. Serve where you are.

Joseph didn't mope in prison. He served. He organized. He helped the other prisoners. He used his gifts even in obscurity.

You can do the same. You may not be in your dream job, but you can serve where you are. You may not be in your dream city, but you can love your neighbours. You may not be in your dream season, but you can be faithful in the small things.

The prison is not a waiting room. It's a classroom. Show up for class.

3. Keep your character clean.

Joseph didn't sleep with Potiphar's wife. He could have. No one would have known. It might have helped his career. It might have gotten him out of slavery.

But he said no. Because character matters more than comfort. Integrity matters more than advancement.

Don't compromise in the prison. Don't take shortcuts. Don't sin to escape. The prison is temporary. Your character is permanent.

4. Remember the dreams.

Joseph didn't forget the dreams. He didn't let go of the promise. Even when it looked impossible, he held on to what God had said.

You need to do the same. Write down the promises God has given you. Re-read them. Pray them back to Him. Let them be the anchor for your soul in the storm.

The dreams are not dead. They're just dormant. Growing underground. Getting ready to explode into the sunlight.

5. Trust the Vinedresser's timeline.

This is the hardest one.

You want God to work on your schedule. He won't. He works on His schedule. And His schedule is always, always, always later than you want and better than you imagine.

Joseph waited thirteen years. Abraham waited twenty-five for Isaac. Moses waited forty years in the desert. David waited at least fifteen years from anointing to throne. Jesus waited thirty years before His ministry began.

You are not special. You will wait too.

But the waiting is not wasted. The waiting is the work. The waiting is what produces the fruit that will last.

Trust the timeline. Even when it hurts. Even when it doesn't make sense. Even when you're tempted to give up.

The Vinedresser knows what He's doing.

The Palace Is Coming

I want to give you hope.

The palace is coming.

Not necessarily a literal palace. Not necessarily wealth, fame, or power. But fruit. Purpose. Fulfilment. The thing God created you for. The thing He's been preparing you for in the prison.

Joseph's prison didn't last forever. Neither will yours.

One day, the cupbearer will remember. One day, the dream will come true. One day, the brothers will bow. One day, you will look back on this season and say, "That was the hardest thing I ever went through, and it was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Not because the pain was fun. Because the fruit was worth it.

Here's what Joseph said to his brothers, years after they sold him into slavery:

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (Genesis 50:20)

Your brothers—the people who hurt you, the circumstances that crushed you, the years you lost—they meant it for evil. They intended to destroy you.

But God meant it for good.

He meant the false accusation for good. He meant the prison for good. He meant the forgotten years for good. He meant every tear, every sleepless night, every unanswered prayer for good.

Not because He is cruel. Because He is the Vinedresser. And the Vinedresser knows that the sweetest fruit grows in the hardest soil.

The prison is not the end. The palace is coming.

Hold on.

A Letter to the Prisoner

I want to speak directly to you. The one who feels like you're in chains. The one who has been waiting so long you've almost forgotten what you're waiting for. The one who is tempted to give up, to compromise, to take the shortcut, to settle for less than the dream.

I see you.

I know it's dark. I know it's lonely. I know you've prayed until you have no words left. I know you've wondered if God forgot you. I know you've questioned whether you heard Him at all.

Here's what I need you to hear.

You are not forgotten. You are being prepared.

Every day in this prison is a day of pruning. Every tear is watering a seed you cannot see. Every unanswered prayer is shaping a faith that will not break.

The Vinedresser has not abandoned you. He is right here, in the dark with you, doing His deepest work.

He is cutting away your impatience.

He is pruning your pride.

He is killing your self-sufficiency.

He is growing your faith in the only soil where faith can grow—the soil of suffering and waiting.

And one day—sooner than you think, later than you want—the door will open. Not because you finally prayed hard enough. Because the work will be done. Because the fruit will be ready. Because the Vinedresser will know that the time has come.

And you will walk out of that prison not as the same person who walked in. You will walk out ready. Ready to rule. Ready to lead. Ready to bear fruit that will last.

The palace is coming.

Don't give up five minutes before the miracle.

PART THREE:
THE PARADOX THAT BREAKS EVERYONE

Chapter 9:

More Fruit = More Pruning (Yes, You Read That Right)

I need to tell you about the moment I almost quit. Not quit ministry. Not quit church. Quit everything. Quit believing. Quit praying. Quit pretending I had it all together. Quit the whole Christian experiment.

I was twenty-nine. I had been in full-time ministry for seven years. I had seen God move. I had seen people saved. I had seen marriages restored. I had preached sermons that made people cry and laugh and raise their hands and come to the altar.

And I was exhausted.

Not the good kind of exhausted, where you've worked hard and you're tired but satisfied. The bad kind. The kind where you wake up in the morning and the first thought in your head is, *I can't do this anymore.*

The pruning had been relentless. Relationship cuts. Financial cuts. Ministry cuts. Dreams cut. Expectations cut. My ego cut so many times I wasn't sure there was anything left.

And I had started to believe a lie. A subtle, poisonous lie that almost destroyed me.

The lie was this: *If you're being pruned this much, you must be doing something wrong. God must be punishing you. You must have missed His will. You must not be good enough. You must be failing.*

I didn't say it out loud. But I believed it. Deep in my gut, I believed that the knife meant disapproval. That the pain meant I had messed up. That the cuts were God's way of saying, "You're not cutting it."

I was wrong.

Dead wrong.

The opposite was true. The pruning wasn't proof of my failure. It was proof of my fruitfulness. The Father wasn't cutting me because I was bad. He was cutting me because I was bearing fruit, and He wanted more.

I had misunderstood the entire passage.

And if you're reading this right now, feeling cut, feeling confused, feeling like the knife means God is angry at you—you've misunderstood too.

Let me fix that.

The Paradox Stated Simply

Here it is. The paradox that breaks everyone.

The more fruit you bear, the more you will be pruned.

Not the less. The more.

Read John 15:2 again: *"Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."*

Not "every branch that does bear fruit he leaves alone." Not "every branch that does bear fruit he rewards with a vacation." Not "every branch that does bear fruit he promotes to a position where pruning is no longer necessary."

He prunes.

The pruning is not the absence of fruitfulness. The pruning is the result of fruitfulness. The Father doesn't waste His knife on dead branches. Dead branches get thrown away. The knife is for living wood. The knife is for branches that are already producing.

Think about that.

If you are being cut right now—if the knife is deep in your life, removing things you thought were permanent, cutting away relationships, dreams, comforts, securities—it is not because you are failing.

It is because you are succeeding.

Not in the world's eyes, maybe. Not in your own eyes, probably. But in the eyes of the Vinedresser, you are a branch worth cutting. You are alive enough to hurt. You are fruitful enough to improve. You are valuable enough to invest in.

The knife is not a demotion. The knife is a promotion.

Why This Paradox Breaks People

Let me tell you why this is so hard to accept.

Because everything in our culture trains us to expect that success leads to ease. Hard work leads to rest. Achievement leads to reward. The climb leads to the summit, and the summit is where you stop climbing.

We see it everywhere.

You work hard in school, you get into a good college. You work hard in college, you get a good job. You work hard at your job, you get promoted. You get promoted, you get more money, more vacation, more respect, more comfort.

Cause and effect. Input and output. Climb and rest.

But the kingdom of God doesn't work that way.

In the kingdom of God, fruitfulness leads to more cutting. Success leads to more suffering. Maturity leads to more pruning. The closer you get to Jesus, the more the Father cuts. The more you produce, the more the knife comes out.

This is offensive. It's offensive to our sense of fairness. It's offensive to our American Dream. It's offensive to every instinct we have about how life should work.

No wonder so many Christians bail. They thought following Jesus would make life easier. They thought obedience would lead to comfort. They thought fruitfulness would lead to a platform, a paycheck, and a pat on the back.

Instead, they got the knife.

And they concluded that they must be doing something wrong. That God must be punishing them. That they must not have enough faith. That they must be missing something.

They're not missing anything. They're experiencing exactly what Jesus promised.

"In the world you will have tribulation." (John 16:33)

Not "you might have tribulation." Not "if you sin, you'll have tribulation." *You will have tribulation.*

Because the world is broken. Because the flesh is weak. Because the enemy is real. And because the Father is pruning you, and pruning hurts.

The Three Lies You Believe About Pruning

Let me name the lies. Because you're believing them. I know you are. I believed them too.

Lie #1: Pruning means God is angry at me.

This is the most common lie. The knife comes, and you immediately assume you've done something wrong. You search your heart for hidden sin. You wonder if you've been disobedient. You ask God to show you what you need to repent of.

And sometimes, yes, the knife is cutting sin. We covered that in Chapter 4.

But sometimes the knife is cutting good things that have become idols. We covered that in Chapter 5.

And sometimes the knife is cutting your ego. We covered that in Chapter 6.

And sometimes the knife is cutting relationships. We covered that in Chapter 7.

And sometimes the knife is just cutting. Because you're bearing fruit. And the Vinedresser wants more.

Not because He's angry. Because He's invested.

Here's how you can tell the difference. When God is angry, He withdraws. He hides His face. He gives you over to your sin. He stops pursuing you.

But when God is pruning, He is present. He is near. He is actively, intentionally working. The knife is not the absence of God. The knife is the presence of God, doing His deepest work.

If you're feeling cut, don't assume God is angry. Assume God is near. Assume He is up to something. Assume He loves you too much to leave you where you are.

Lie #2: Pruning means I'm not good enough.

This lie sounds humble, but it's actually pride dressed up in religious clothes.

You think you need to be better. Stronger. Holier. More disciplined. You think if you could just pray more, read more, serve more, give more, then the pruning would stop. Then the knife would be put away. Then you would finally be good enough for God to leave you alone.

That's not humility. That's works-righteousness. That's you trying to earn your way out of the Vinedresser's care.

Here's the truth. You will never be good enough to stop the pruning. Not because you're not trying hard enough. Because the goal is not for you to be good enough. The goal is for you to bear much fruit. And bearing much fruit requires much pruning.

Jesus was perfect. Absolutely sinless. Completely holy. And He was pruned more than anyone in history. The Father cut Him on the cross. He bled. He died. He bore the full weight of the knife.

If Jesus wasn't "good enough" to escape the knife, what makes you think you will be?

The knife is not about your goodness. It's about your fruitfulness. And fruitfulness requires cutting, no matter how good you are.

Lie #3: Pruning means I'm doing something wrong.

This is the lie that almost destroyed me.

I thought the pruning was a sign that I had missed God's will. That I was in the wrong place. That I was doing the wrong thing. That I needed to change something—my job, my city, my church, my approach.

So I tried to fix it. I tried to find the hidden sin. I tried to pray the right prayers. I tried to get the right prophetic words. I tried to position myself for breakthrough.

Nothing changed. Because nothing needed to change. I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was doing everything right. That's why I was getting pruned.

The pruning wasn't a detour. It was the path. It wasn't a sign to quit. It was a sign to stay. It wasn't God's rejection. It was God's investment.

If you're being pruned, don't assume you're doing something wrong. Assume you're doing something right. Assume the Vinedresser is pleased with your fruit. So pleased that He wants more.

The Farmer's Logic

Let me explain this with a farming analogy. Because Jesus used farming analogies for a reason. Farming makes sense to people who actually grow things.

I have a friend who grows grapes. Actual grapes. In an actual vineyard. He prunes his vines every single year. He doesn't prune the dead ones. He cuts them down and burns them. That's not pruning. That's removal.

Pruning is for the living vines. The ones that produced fruit last season. The ones that are full of potential. The ones that could produce even more if he cuts them back.

I asked him once, "Does pruning hurt the vine?"

He looked at me like I was stupid. "Of course it hurts. You're cutting living wood. The vine bleeds sap. It looks like it's dying. A new farmer would panic."

"But?"

"But the vine doesn't die. It comes back stronger. The cuts force the vine to put its energy into fruit instead of leaves. More cuts, more fruit. Less cuts, more leaves."

Then he said something I'll never forget.

"A vineyard that isn't pruned is just a jungle. It looks impressive. Lots of growth. Lots of leaves. Lots of green. But you can't eat leaves. You want fruit? You need the knife."

That's the farmer's logic.

The world looks at a pruned vine and sees death.
The farmer looks at a pruned vine and sees a future harvest.

The world looks at your suffering and sees failure.
The Father looks at your pruning and sees fruit.

You want to look impressive? Grow leaves. Lots of them. Big, beautiful, green leaves. Everyone will be impressed. They'll say, "Look how much you're growing. Look how busy you are. Look how much you're doing."

You want to bear fruit? Get cut. Let the Vinedresser take His knife to your life. Let Him cut away the leaves. Let Him strip you down to almost nothing. Let Him do whatever it takes to make you fruitful.

It won't look impressive. It will look like death.

But it will produce a harvest that lasts.

The Branch That Became a Jungle

Let me tell you about a man I'll call Mark.

Mark was a pastor. A successful pastor. His church was growing. His reputation was growing. His influence was growing. He was invited to speak at conferences. He wrote a book. He had a podcast. He was building something impressive.

Lots of leaves.

Then the knife came.

A moral failure. Not sexual. Financial. He had misused church funds. Not embezzlement, exactly. More like creative accounting. Shifting money from one account to another. Borrowing from restricted funds to cover budget shortfalls. Not illegal, technically. But not honest.

He lost his church. His reputation. His book deals. His podcast. His platform. His income. His identity.

He spent three years in the wilderness. Counselling. Restitution. Confession. Tears. The whole ugly, humiliating process.

I talked to him after he came out the other side. He had started a small group. Not a church. Not a ministry. Just a small group. Twelve people. Meeting in a living room. No platform. No podcast. No book deals.

I asked him, "Do you ever miss the old days?"

He laughed. Not a bitter laugh. A free laugh.

"I miss the attention. I miss the applause. I miss feeling important. But I don't miss the person I was. I was a jungle. Lots of leaves. No fruit. The knife hurt. It almost killed me. But it saved me. Now I have fruit. Twelve people who actually know Jesus because of me. That's more than I had in twenty years of ministry."

Mark learned what I'm trying to teach you.

Leaves are easy. Fruit is hard. Leaves grow without pruning. Fruit requires the knife.

Which do you want?

The Test of True Discipleship

Here's where we get to the heart of the matter.

Jesus said, *"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."* (John 15:8)

Not "by this you prove to be successful." Not "by this you prove to be impressive."
Not "by this you prove to be popular."

By this you prove to be my disciples.

The proof of discipleship is not your theology quiz score. It's not your church attendance. It's not your ministry title. It's not your social media following.

It's fruit.

And fruit requires pruning.

So here's the question that will determine everything about your Christian life.

Are you willing to be pruned?

Not just once. Not just when it's convenient. Not just when the cuts make sense to you.

Are you willing to be pruned again and again and again? As long as you live? As long as the Vinedresser keeps bringing the knife?

Because that's what fruitfulness requires. Not a one-time surrender. A daily surrender. A moment-by-moment laying down of your right to be comfortable, to be in control, to be left alone.

Are you willing to let the Father cut away everything that's in the way of more fruit?

Your favourite sin? Cut.

Your good thing that became an idol? Cut.

Your ego and your easy button? Cut.

Your relationships that hinder holiness? Cut.

Your prison season that feels pointless? Stay. It's preparing you.

Are you willing?

Most people aren't. Most people want just enough fruit to feel good about themselves, but not so much fruit that they need the knife. They want the reward without the pruning. They want the harvest without the cutting. They want the palace without the prison.

That's not discipleship. That's consumer Christianity. And it produces no fruit.

Jesus didn't come to make you comfortable. He came to make you fruitful. And fruitfulness comes at a cost.

The cost is the knife.

Are you willing to pay it?

A Word to the Weary Pruned

Let me speak to the person who is exhausted from the cutting.

You've been pruned so many times you've lost count. You've lost relationships. You've lost dreams. You've lost opportunities. You've lost your health. You've lost your savings. You've lost your reputation. You've lost your sense of direction.

And you're tired. Not just physically tired. Soul tired. The kind of tired that makes you wonder if it's worth it.

I want to say something to you that might sound crazy.

The pruning is almost over.

Not because the Vinedresser is going to stop. But because the harvest is coming. The whole point of pruning is the harvest. The Vinedresser doesn't cut for the sake of

cutting. He cuts for the sake of fruit. And when the fruit is ready, the pruning stops. Not because you're perfect. Because the season has changed.

There is a time for pruning. And there is a time for harvest.

Your harvest is coming.

Not because you've earned it. Because the Vinedresser is faithful. He doesn't start a work and then abandon it. He doesn't prune a branch and then leave it to wither. He finishes what He starts.

"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

The completion is coming. The harvest is coming. The fruit is coming.

But first, the knife.

Don't give up. Don't quit. Don't let the pain convince you that the Vinedresser doesn't know what He's doing.

He knows.

He knows exactly what He's doing.

And when the harvest comes, you will look back at every cut and say, "It was worth it. Every tear. Every loss. Every sleepless night. It was worth it."

Not because the pain was fun. Because the fruit is glorious.

Hold on.

The knife is almost done.

The harvest is almost here.

Chapter 10:

Why Most Christians Quit Here

Let me tell you something nobody talks about in the baptism class.

Most Christians don't make it.

Not to hell. I'm not talking about final salvation. I'm talking about fruitfulness. I'm talking about finishing. I'm talking about becoming the person God created them to be, bearing the fruit God planted them to bear, completing the race God marked out for them to run.

Most Christians quit somewhere between the starting line and the finish line.

They don't quit publicly. They don't announce it on Instagram. They don't stand up in church and say, "I'm done with this whole Jesus thing." They just... fade. Slowly. Imperceptibly. Like a photograph left in the sun.

They stop praying. Not all at once. Just less. Then less. Then hardly at all.

They stop reading their Bibles. Not dramatically. They just get busy. Then busier. Then they realize it's been three months since they opened it.

They stop gathering with the church. Not because they're angry. Because it's Sunday morning and they're tired, and the kids have sports, and the lawn needs mowing, and honestly, they're not getting anything out of the service anyway.

They stop sharing their faith. Not because they're ashamed. Because they don't have anything to share anymore. The fire is out. The passion is gone. The urgency is a distant memory.

They stop growing. They stop changing. They stop becoming.

They just... plateau. And then decline. And then disappear.

And if you asked them why, most of them couldn't give you a clear answer. It wasn't one big thing. It was a thousand small things. A thousand small cuts. A thousand small disappointments. A thousand small moments when the knife came, and instead of staying, they pulled away.

They quit here.

Right here, in the paradox. Right here, where fruitfulness requires more pruning. Right here, where the knife keeps coming, and the easy button never arrives.

They quit because they didn't understand the paradox. They thought following Jesus would get easier. It got harder. They thought obedience would lead to comfort. It led to more cutting. They thought fruitfulness would mean they had arrived. It meant the Vinedresser was just getting started.

And they couldn't take it anymore.

So they quit.

The Four Ways Christians Quit

Let me name the four exits. Because you're probably standing near one of them right now.

Exit One: Despair

This is the most common exit. Not dramatic. Not angry. Just... hopeless.

The Christian despairs when they conclude that nothing will ever change. They've been pruned. They've been cut. They've been waiting. They've been praying. And nothing. No breakthrough. No relief. No fruit. Just more pain, more loss, more confusion.

They don't get angry at God. They just stop believing that He's going to do anything. They stop expecting. They stop hoping. They stop praying with expectation. They go through the motions because it's what they've always done, but their heart is a thousand miles away.

Despair is dangerous because it's quiet. You can be in despair for years without anyone noticing. You show up. You sing. You nod. You give. But you've already left. Your body is in the pew. Your soul is in the parking lot.

The despairing Christian doesn't need a new Bible study. They need hope. Real hope. The kind that comes from remembering that the Vinedresser finishes what He starts.

Exit Two: Resistance

This exit is louder. More active. The Christian doesn't fade away. They fight.

They fight the pruning. They argue with God. They demand explanations. They bargain. They negotiate. They try to make deals. "If You'll just stop cutting, I'll do X, Y, and Z."

When God doesn't cooperate, they get angry. Not quiet despair. Hot, burning, accusing anger. "Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong? Why won't You answer me? Why won't You fix this?"

They resist the knife. They pull away from the cut. They try to protect the very things the Vinedresser is trying to remove. They cling to the idol. They hold onto the relationship. They defend their ego. They refuse to let go.

The resistant Christian doesn't need more information. They need surrender. They need to stop fighting the Vinedresser and start trusting that He knows what He's doing.

Exit Three: Bitterness

This exit is the most toxic. The Christian doesn't just get angry. They get bitter. They let the root of bitterness grow until it poisons everything.

Bitterness is what happens when you refuse to forgive God for not meeting your expectations. You expected Him to protect you. He didn't. You expected Him to provide for you. He didn't. You expected Him to heal you. He didn't. You expected Him to come through. He didn't.

And now you're bitter. Not just at God. At the church. At your leaders. At your friends. At everyone who still believes, still hopes, still expects. Their faith irritates you. Their joy offends you. Their worship feels like mockery.

The bitter Christian is dangerous. They don't just quit themselves. They try to take others with them. They gossip. They slander. They plant seeds of doubt. They say things like, "You'll learn. Just wait. God will let you down too."

The bitter Christian doesn't need a theological argument. They need to forgive. They need to release the offense. They need to stop keeping score and start trusting that God's ways are right, even when they don't understand.

Exit Four: Self-Pity

This exit is the most deceptive. It looks humble. It sounds spiritual. But it's just pride wearing a mask of victimhood.

The self-pitying Christian says things like, "I guess I'm just not meant to be fruitful. God must not have gifted me. Maybe I'm not called. Maybe I'm not chosen. Maybe I'm just not good enough."

This sounds humble. It sounds like they're accepting their limitations. But it's actually a form of rebellion. They're accusing God of being unfair. They're saying, "You gave others what they need to succeed, but You held out on me. You blessed them, but You passed over me."

Self-pity is a way of avoiding responsibility. It's easier to say "God hasn't called me" than to admit "I haven't been faithful." It's easier to say "I'm not gifted for that" than to admit "I'm not willing to pay the price."

The self-pitying Christian doesn't need encouragement. They need a wake-up call. They need to stop feeling sorry for themselves and start doing the hard work of abiding.

The Moment of Decision

Here's what you need to understand.

Every Christian reaches a moment—usually multiple moments—where they have to decide. The knife is in the air. The Vinedresser is about to cut. And you have a choice.

You can pull away. You can protect yourself. You can resist. You can run. You can quit.

Or you can stay. You can trust. You can surrender. You can let the knife fall.

The decision you make in that moment determines everything. Not just whether you'll bear fruit in this season. Whether you'll be a Christian at all. Whether you'll finish the race or fade into the crowd of almost-disciples who almost-made-it but didn't.

Jesus talked about this. In the parable of the sower, He described four kinds of soil. Only one produced fruit. The others looked promising. They started strong. But they didn't finish.

The rocky soil received the word with joy. But when tribulation or persecution came—when the knife appeared—they fell away. (Matthew 13:20-21)

The thorny soil heard the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choked it out. The knife didn't even have to cut. They were already strangled by other things.

The good soil heard the word, understood it, and bore fruit. Some a hundredfold. Some sixty. Some thirty.

Notice: even the good soil produced different amounts. Not everyone bears the same quantity of fruit. But everyone bears fruit. Because they stayed. They endured. They didn't quit when the knife came.

Which soil are you?

Why You Haven't Quit Yet (If You Haven't)

If you're still reading this book, you probably haven't quit yet. Not completely. You're still here. Still searching. Still hoping. Still willing to be challenged.

Let me tell you why.

Because the Holy Spirit is still at work in you. He hasn't given up on you. He's still pruning. Still cutting. Still pushing you toward fruitfulness.

And because somewhere, deep down, you know that quitting is not the answer. You know that the despair, the resistance, the bitterness, the self-pity—they're all dead ends. They don't lead to life. They lead to more death.

You haven't quit because you know, in your bones, that the Vinedresser is good. Even when it hurts. Even when you don't understand. Even when you're tempted to walk away.

You know that the knife is love.

And you're still here.

That's not nothing. That's everything. That's the Holy Spirit's grip on your soul. That's the Vinedresser's patience. That's the Vine's life flowing through you even when you can't feel it.

Don't take that for granted. Don't assume you'll always feel this way. The temptation to quit will come again. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next week. Maybe in the middle of the night when you're alone with your thoughts and the pain is fresh.

When that moment comes—and it will come—remember this chapter.

Remember that most Christians quit here. Right here, in the paradox. Right here, where fruitfulness requires more pruning.

And decide, right now, before the moment arrives, that you will not be one of them.

What Keeps You from Quitting

Let me give you five anchors. Five truths that will hold you when the storm comes and every instinct tells you to let go.

Anchor One: The Vinedresser is good.

Not just powerful. Good. Not just sovereign. Good. Not just in control. Good.

His goodness is not defined by your comfort. His goodness is not measured by your happiness. His goodness is His character. And His character is love. And love sometimes cuts.

When you're tempted to quit because the pruning hurts, remind yourself: the Vinedresser is good. He has never made a mistake. He has never cut too deep. He has never pruned a branch He didn't intend to keep. He is good. All the time. Even now. Especially now.

Anchor Two: The Vine is sufficient.

Jesus said, *"My grace is sufficient for you."* Not "my grace is sufficient for some people." Not "my grace is sufficient for easy situations." *My grace is sufficient for you.*

Right now. In this pruning. In this pain. In this confusion. In this loss. His grace is enough. Not will be enough. Is enough.

You don't need more than Jesus. You don't need a different life. You don't need a different calling. You don't need a different set of circumstances. You need more of Jesus. And He is available. Right now. In the middle of the cut.

Anchor Three: The fruit is coming.

The Vinedresser doesn't prune for no reason. He prunes for fruit. The fruit is coming. Not maybe. Not possibly. Not if you get your act together. The fruit is coming because the Vinedresser is faithful.

You may not see it yet. You may not feel it yet. You may not believe it yet. But the fruit is coming. The harvest is on its way. The season is changing.

Don't give up five minutes before the miracle.

Anchor Four: You are not alone.

Every fruitful Christian in history has been through the knife. Every single one. Not some. All.

Abraham was pruned. Moses was pruned. David was pruned. Isaiah was pruned. Jeremiah was pruned. Peter was pruned. Paul was pruned. Every martyr, every missionary, every reformer, every saint—they all knew the knife.

You are not special. You are not being singled out. You are not the only one who has ever felt this way. You are joining a great cloud of witnesses who endured the knife and bore fruit.

They made it. So can you.

Anchor Five: The alternative is worse.

This is the anchor that holds when nothing else does.

What's the alternative to enduring the pruning? Quitting. Walking away. Becoming a fruitless branch. Being gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

That's not a threat. That's a fact. Jesus said it. The alternative to fruitfulness is fire.

So yes, the knife hurts. Yes, the pruning is painful. Yes, you bleed. But the fire is worse. The fire is final. The fire is forever.

When you're tempted to quit because the pruning is hard, ask yourself: where will I go? Who else has the words of eternal life? What other vine will produce fruit that lasts?

There is no alternative. There is only the Vine and the knife.

Choose the knife.

A Letter to the One Who Is About to Quit

I need to speak directly to you.

You're close. I can feel it. You've been thinking about it for weeks. Months. Maybe years. You're tired of the pain. Tired of the waiting. Tired of the disappointment. Tired of praying and getting silence. Tired of hoping and getting nothing. Tired of believing and watching everything fall apart.

You're thinking about walking away.

Not dramatically. Just quietly. Stop reading your Bible. Stop praying. Stop going to church. Stop pretending you have it all together. Just let it fade. Let the whole Christian thing become a distant memory, like a childhood hobby you outgrew.

I want to tell you something.

If you walk away, you will regret it.

Not immediately. At first, it might feel like relief. No more guilt about not praying. No more pressure to be holy. No more cognitive dissonance between what you believe and how you live. Just freedom. Just peace. Just the quiet absence of all that religious noise.

But that relief won't last.

Because the hunger won't go away. The hunger for meaning. The hunger for purpose. The hunger for connection with the God who made you. The hunger that only He can satisfy.

You'll try to fill it with other things. Success. Relationships. Pleasure. Possessions. Distractions. You'll try to drown it out with noise and activity and achievement.

But the hunger will remain. Gnawing. Insistent. Unignorable.

And one day, in a quiet moment—maybe late at night, maybe in a hospital room, maybe at a funeral—you'll realize that you made a terrible mistake. You walked away from the only thing that could ever satisfy you. You traded the Vine for a withered branch. You chose the fire over the knife.

Don't do it.

I'm not saying this to guilt you. I'm saying it to save you. The knife is hard. The pruning is painful. But the fire is worse. So much worse.

Stay.

Just stay.

Don't worry about feeling better. Don't worry about understanding everything. Don't worry about having all the answers. Just stay connected to the Vine. Let the Vinedresser do His work. Let the knife fall where it must.

Stay.

The fruit is coming. I promise you. The fruit is coming.

The Ones Who Made It

Let me end this chapter with a roll call.

Not famous names. Just ordinary people who endured the knife and bore fruit.

The woman whose husband left her, who raised three children alone, who prayed through tears every night, and who now leads a ministry to single mothers.

The man who lost his business in the recession, who worked three jobs to pay his debts, who didn't understand why God let it happen, and who now helps other businessmen navigate failure with faith.

The couple who couldn't have children, who adopted, who fostered, who poured their lives into kids who weren't biologically theirs, and who now have a house full of children who call them mom and dad.

The teenager who was rejected by her friends for her faith, who spent lunch periods alone in the library, who cried herself to sleep more nights than she could count, and who now leads a Bible study for other lonely kids.

The pastor who was fired from his church, who didn't know what to do with his life, who spent years in the wilderness, and who now pastors a different church with more humility and less ego.

The missionary who got sick, who had to come home, who felt like a failure, and who now prays for missionaries from her living room, supporting them in ways no one sees.

They all had the knife. They all wanted to quit. They all almost did.

But they stayed.

And they bore fruit.

You can too.

Don't quit here.

PART FOUR:
OBEDIENCE WITHOUT THE VEGAS LIGHTS

Chapter 11:

What Obedience Actually Looks Like (Boring and Brutal)

Let me tell you about the most disappointing Christian book I ever read.

I picked it up at a conference. The cover was beautiful. The title was provocative. The endorsements were from people I respected. I was sure this book was going to change my life.

It didn't.

Not because the theology was bad. Not because the writing was poor. Because the book promised something that doesn't exist. It promised a shortcut. A secret. A "key" to unlocking a deeper level of spiritual experience. A five-step plan to intimacy with God. A three-week journey to breakthrough.

I read the whole thing. I did the exercises. I prayed the prayers. I implemented the steps.

And nothing happened.

Not because the author was lying. Because there are no shortcuts. There are no secrets. There are no five-step plans that bypass the slow, painful, unglamorous work of daily obedience.

We want the spectacular. The dramatic. The mountaintop. The burning bush. The parting of the Red Sea. The tongues of fire. The Damascus road.

God gives us manna. Daily. Ordinary. Unspectacular. Gather it or starve. No shortcuts.

We want the revival. The awakening. The movement. The stadiums full of people. The viral worship song. The conference where the glory falls.

God gives us Tuesday. The alarm clock. The commute. The inbox. The dishes. The laundry. The difficult conversation. The temptation to gossip. The choice to pray or to scroll. The decision to open the Bible or to turn on the TV.

That's where obedience lives. Not in the spotlight. In the shadows. Not on the stage. In the kitchen. Not in the revival tent. In the quiet, lonely, unspectacular moments when no one is watching and no one is clapping and no one even knows you're making a choice to follow Jesus.

That's what this chapter is about.

Not the dramatic conversion. Not the supernatural healing. Not the prophetic word.
Not the angelic visitation.

The boring, brutal, everyday obedience that actually produces fruit.

The Myth of the Moment

We love the moment.

The moment of salvation. The moment of breakthrough. The moment of healing. The moment of calling. The moment of deliverance. The moment when everything changes and the angels sing and we cry and hug and tell our testimony.

Those moments are real. They happen. I've experienced them. You probably have too.

But here's what nobody tells you.

The moment is not the point. The moment is the beginning. The moment is the door. The moment is the starting line.

What comes after the moment is what matters. The long, slow, unglamorous process of staying in the room after the worship music stops. Of getting up the next morning and choosing obedience again. And the next morning. And the next. And the next. For years. For decades. For the rest of your life.

We have a thousand testimonies about the moment of salvation. We have almost none about the fifty years of faithful marriage that followed. Because fifty years of faithfulness is boring. It doesn't make a good Instagram post. It doesn't get a standing ovation. It doesn't trend on YouTube.

But it produces fruit. More fruit than a thousand moments.

The moment is a seed. Obedience is the watering. The moment is a match. Obedience is the sustained burn. The moment is a pregnancy test. Obedience is the labour and delivery and the sleepless nights and the diapers and the discipline and the decades of parenting.

The moment is cheap. Obedience is expensive.

And most Christians are addicted to the moment. They chase the next high. The next conference. The next retreat. The next altar call. The next prophetic word. The next spiritual experience.

They're like drug addicts, chasing a feeling that never lasts, crashing when the feeling fades, convinced that the problem is the drug and not their addiction to the feeling.

God didn't save you to give you a moment. He saved you to give you a life. A long, hard, beautiful, fruitful life of daily obedience. No shortcuts. No secrets. No five-step plans.

Just Tuesday. And Wednesday. And Thursday. And Friday. And Saturday. And Sunday. And Monday again.

That's where fruit grows. In the boring dirt of ordinary days.

What Obedience Is Not

Before I tell you what obedience looks like, let me tell you what it doesn't look like.

Obedience is not a feeling.

You don't have to feel like obeying to obey. In fact, most of the time, you won't. Your feelings will scream at you to do the opposite. Your feelings will tell you to stay in bed instead of praying. To watch TV instead of reading your Bible. To gossip instead of keeping silent. To retaliate instead of forgiving. To indulge instead of resisting.

Feelings are unreliable. They change with the weather, with your blood sugar, with your sleep quality, with your hormone levels. If you wait until you feel like obeying, you will almost never obey.

Obedience is a choice. A decision. An act of the will. You choose to obey regardless of how you feel. And then you do it. And then you do it again. And eventually, sometimes, the feelings follow.

But don't wait for them. They won't come.

Obedience is not a spiritual high.

The worship service was amazing. The presence of God was thick. You raised your hands. You wept. You felt closer to Jesus than you've ever felt.

That's not obedience. That's an experience. Experiences are gifts from God. They're wonderful. They're encouraging. They're not obedience.

Obedience is what you do on Monday morning when the worship music is off, the lights are up, and the presence of God feels like a distant memory. Obedience is loving your annoying co-worker when you don't feel loving. Obedience is being patient with your children when you've had no sleep. Obedience is giving generously when your bank account is empty. Obedience is confessing your sin when you'd rather hide it.

The spiritual high is easy. Obedience is hard.

Obedience is not perfection.

You will fail. You will sin. You will make wrong choices. You will disappoint God and yourself and others.

That doesn't mean you're not obedient. It means you're human. The difference between the obedient Christian and the disobedient Christian is not that one never fails. It's that one keeps going after failure. Repents. Gets back up. Tries again.

Proverbs 24:16: *"The righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity."*

Not "the righteous never falls." The righteous falls. And rises. And falls. And rises. And falls. And rises.

Obedience is not perfection. Obedience is persistence.

Obedience is not public.

You don't need anyone to know you're obeying. In fact, Jesus said to do your giving, praying, and fasting in secret. (Matthew 6:1-18)

The most important acts of obedience are the ones no one sees. The prayer in the closet. The temptation resisted when no one was watching. The kind word said when no one would know if you'd been silent. The forgiveness offered when the other person doesn't deserve it and will never thank you for it.

If you're only obedient when people are watching, you're not obedient. You're a performer. And performers don't bear fruit. They bear applause, which rots.

What Obedience Actually Looks Like

Let me get practical. Because you need to know what to do on Tuesday.

1. Obedience is waking up and praying before you check your phone.

Your phone is the first thing you reach for. The notifications. The news. The emails. The social media. It's the first voice you hear in the morning.

That's a problem.

Obedience is putting your phone down. Or leaving it in another room. Or turning it off. And praying. Even if you don't feel like it. Even if you're tired. Even if you have nothing to say. Even if you just sit in silence and say, "Here I am. I have nothing. I need You."

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's the most important thing you'll do all day.

2. Obedience is reading your Bible when you don't understand it.

The Bible is confusing. Parts of it are weird. Parts of it are offensive. Parts of it seem contradictory. Parts of it make you uncomfortable.

You'll be tempted to skip it. To read the parts you like and ignore the rest. To listen to someone else tell you what it means instead of reading it for yourself.

Obedience is reading it anyway. Asking God to help you understand. Trusting that even the parts you don't like are true and good and for your benefit. Showing up day after day, even when it feels like nothing is happening.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how the Word gets into your bones.

3. Obedience is going to church when you don't feel like it.

Sunday morning comes. You're tired. The kids are cranky. The weather is bad. The sermon last week was boring. The music is too loud or too soft or too old or too new. You have a million reasons to stay home.

Obedience is going anyway. Sitting in the pew. Singing the songs. Listening to the sermon. Not because you get something out of it every time. Because you're part of a family, and families show up. Because you need the means of grace, even when they don't feel graceful. Because your presence encourages others, even when you don't feel encouraging.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you stay connected to the body.

4. Obedience is giving when it hurts.

The tithe. The offering. The gift to the person in need. The donation to the mission. The money you could have spent on yourself.

You'll have a thousand reasons not to give. The budget is tight. The bills are due. You'll give next month. You gave last month. Other people have more to give than you do.

Obedience is giving anyway. First. Before the bills. Before the fun money. Before the savings. Giving until it hurts. Giving until you feel it. Giving until you have to trust God to provide.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you kill the idol of money.

5. Obedience is forgiving when you want revenge.

Someone hurt you. Deeply. Deliberately. Repeatedly. They haven't apologized. They haven't changed. They haven't made it right.

You want justice. You want revenge. You want them to feel the pain they caused you.

Obedience is forgiving them anyway. Releasing the debt. Letting go of the right to get even. Praying for them. Blessing them. Leaving justice in God's hands.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you become like Jesus.

6. Obedience is confessing your sin when you'd rather hide it.

You messed up. Again. The same sin you confessed last week. The same struggle you said you'd overcome. The same failure that makes you feel like a hypocrite.

You want to hide. You want to pretend it didn't happen. You want to minimize it, rationalize it, excuse it, or blame someone else.

Obedience is confessing it. To God. To a trusted brother or sister. To the person you wronged. Speaking the ugly truth out loud. Receiving forgiveness. Accepting consequences. Starting again.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you stay clean.

7. Obedience is serving when no one thanks you.

You volunteered. You showed up. You did the work. You gave your time, your energy, your money.

And no one noticed. No one thanked you. No one even knew.

You're tempted to stop. To only serve when you get recognition. To only help when you get credit.

Obedience is serving anyway. Cleaning the toilet no one sees. Teaching the class no one appreciates. Making the meal no one compliments. Showing up when no one claps.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you store up treasure in heaven.

8. Obedience is speaking the truth when it costs you.

Someone is wrong. A friend is sinning. A leader is misleading. A doctrine is being twisted. The truth needs to be spoken.

But speaking the truth will cost you. Your friendship. Your reputation. Your position. Your popularity. Your comfort.

You're tempted to stay silent. To let it slide. To mind your own business. To keep the peace.

Obedience is speaking anyway. Gently. Lovingly. Humbly. But clearly. Telling the truth even when it's hard. Even when it's unwelcome. Even when it costs you everything.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you love people enough to tell them the truth.

9. Obedience is waiting when you want to run.

You're in a hard season. The prison. The waiting room. The valley. The desert. And you want out. You want to run. You want to take a shortcut. You want to force a door that God has closed.

Obedience is staying. Sitting in the waiting room. Enduring the prison. Trusting the timeline. Not taking the shortcut. Not forcing the door.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you learn patience.

10. Obedience is dying when you want to live.

This is the hardest one.

Jesus said, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* (Matthew 16:24)

The cross is not a metaphor for a difficult season. The cross is an instrument of execution. Taking up your cross means dying. Dying to your plans. Your dreams. Your rights. Your comfort. Your reputation. Your life.

Every act of obedience is a little death. A small crucifixion. A choice to kill your will and submit to God's.

That's obedience. It's boring. It's brutal. It's how you follow Jesus to the resurrection.

The Boredom Barrier

Here's why most Christians never get to real obedience.

They get bored.

The initial excitement wears off. The spiritual high fades. The novelty disappears. And what's left is the daily grind of waking up, praying, reading, going to church, giving, forgiving, confessing, serving, speaking, waiting, and dying.

It's not exciting. It's not dramatic. It's not Instagram-worthy. It's just... Tuesday. Again.

And they quit. Not because it's too hard. Because it's too boring. They want fireworks. God gives them manna. They want a spectacle. God gives them a cross. They want a mountaintop. God gives them a valley.

So they wander off in search of something more exciting. A new church. A new teacher. A new experience. A new revelation. A new anointing. A new movement.

And they miss the fruit that only grows in the boring dirt of ordinary obedience.

Let me tell you something.

The most fruitful Christians I know are not the most exciting. They're the most boring. They pray every day. They read their Bible every day. They go to church every week. They give consistently. They forgive quickly. They confess honestly. They serve quietly. They speak truth gently. They wait patiently. They die daily.

They're not famous. They don't have podcasts. They don't write books. They don't speak at conferences. They just... obey. Day after day after day. Boring. Brutal. Faithful.

And they bear fruit. Not the flashy kind. The real kind. The kind that lasts. The kind that changes lives. The kind that glorifies God.

You want to bear fruit? Stop chasing the spectacular. Start embracing the boring.

A Letter to the Bored Obedient

Let me speak to the person who has been faithfully obeying for years and feels nothing.

You pray. You read. You go to church. You give. You forgive. You serve. You do all the things. And you're tired. Not tired of obeying. Tired of obeying and feeling nothing. Tired of the dryness. Tired of the silence. Tired of wondering if any of it matters.

I want to tell you something.

Your obedience is not wasted. Your faithfulness is not forgotten. The fruit is growing. Even when you can't see it. Even when you can't feel it. Even when it feels like you're just going through the motions.

"Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up." (Galatians 6:9)

In due season. Not now. Not yet. But coming. The harvest is coming.

The boredom you're feeling is not a sign that you're doing something wrong. It's a sign that you're doing something right. You're not chasing feelings. You're not dependent on spiritual highs. You're just... obeying. Like a branch abiding in the vine. Not exciting. Not dramatic. Just connected.

That's where fruit comes from.

Don't give up. Don't chase the next shiny thing. Don't abandon the boring obedience for the spectacular counterfeit.

Stay. Abide. Obey.

The fruit is coming.

Chapter 12: The Father Isn't Mad at You (He's Making You Useful)

I need to clear something up. Something that has caused more unnecessary suffering in the Christian life than almost any other misunderstanding.

You think the Father is angry at you.

Not all the time, maybe. Not in a theological sense. You wouldn't say it out loud. You know the right answers: God is love, God is gracious, God forgives, etc., etc.

But deep down, in the place where you actually live, you believe that the Father is disappointed in you. That He's keeping score. That He's waiting for you to mess up so He can punish you. That every difficulty in your life is a payment for your sins. That the knife is His way of saying, "You deserve this."

You believe this because you've been taught wrong. Or because you've been hurt by people who claimed to represent God. Or because your own heart projects its guilt onto the Father. Or because the enemy has been whispering lies into your ear for so long that you can't distinguish them from the truth anymore.

Whatever the reason, you need to hear this.

The Father is not mad at you.

He never was. He isn't now. He never will be.

Not because your sin doesn't matter. It does. Not because God is indifferent to evil. He isn't. Not because there's no judgment. There is.

But because the judgment that you deserved fell on Jesus. The anger that your sin provoked was poured out on the cross. The punishment that should have been yours was exhausted on the Son.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
(Romans 8:1)

No condemnation. Not less condemnation. Not condemnation that's been reduced or suspended or put on probation. No condemnation.

Zero. Zilch. Nada.

If you are in Christ Jesus—if you have repented of your sins and trusted in His death and resurrection—then there is no wrath left for you. None. It's gone. Exhausted. Spent. Finished.

The Father's anger against you was fully, completely, eternally satisfied at the cross.

So if He's not angry, why the knife? Why the pruning? Why the pain? Why the suffering?

Because He's not punishing you. He's making you useful.

The Difference Between Punishment and Pruning

This is the most important distinction in this entire book. Get this wrong, and you'll spend your whole life misinterpreting God's actions. Get this right, and everything changes.

Punishment is for guilt. Pruning is for growth.

Punishment satisfies justice. Pruning produces fruit.

Punishment is the result of wrath. Pruning is the result of love.

Punishment is retributive. Pruning is restorative.

Punishment is for the guilty. Pruning is for the beloved.

When the Father prunes you, He is not punishing you for your sins. Your sins have already been punished. On the cross. Fully. Completely. Forever.

So what is He doing? He's preparing you for fruitfulness. He's removing obstacles to your growth. He's shaping you into the person He created you to be. He's making you useful.

Think about a surgeon.

When a surgeon cuts into your body, is he angry at you? Is he punishing you? Does he have a grudge against you?

No. He's healing you. He's removing a tumour. He's repairing a defect. He's saving your life.

The cut hurts. The recovery is painful. But the surgeon is not your enemy. He's your friend. He's using his knife to make you well.

The Father is the same. His knife is not the knife of judgment. It's the knife of healing. Not the knife of wrath. The knife of love. Not the knife of punishment. The knife of preparation.

He's not mad at you. He's making you useful.

The Cross Changes Everything

Let me take you to the cross.

Jesus is hanging there. Nails through His hands and feet. Thorns on His head. Spear in His side. The weight of every sin ever committed—yours, mine, the whole world's—crushing down on His soul.

And the Father turns away. Not because He's angry at the Son. Because He's pouring out His wrath on the Son. The wrath that we deserved. The punishment that should have been ours.

Jesus cries out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46)

In that moment, Jesus experiences something He had never experienced before and will never experience again. Separation from the Father. The full force of divine judgment. The hell that we should have endured.

And then He says, "*It is finished.*" (John 19:30)

The Greek word is *tetelestai*. It means "paid in full." It was stamped on receipts and bills when the debt was satisfied. Nothing left owing.

Jesus paid it all. All of it. Every sin. Every rebellion. Every failure. Every moment of disobedience. Past, present, future. All of it. Paid in full.

So when you stand before the Father, there is no debt left. No payment required. No punishment remaining. The bill has a giant red stamp across it: *PAID*.

If the Father were to punish you for your sins after Jesus already paid for them, He would be unjust. He would be demanding double payment. He would be saying that the blood of Jesus was not enough.

But the blood of Jesus was enough. It is enough. It will always be enough.

Therefore, the Father is not punishing you. He is not angry at you. He is not holding your sins against you. They are gone. Forgiven. Forgotten.

"I will remember their sins no more." (Hebrews 8:12)

Not "I will remember them but not act on them." No more. Gone. Erased. As far as the east is from the west. (Psalm 103:12)

So if the knife is not punishment, what is it?

It's pruning. It's preparation. It's the Father making you useful.

Why You Need to Be Made Useful

Here's the thing about usefulness.

You're not useful yet. Not as useful as you could be. Not as useful as you will be.

You have attachments that need to be cut. You have habits that need to be broken. You have pride that needs to be crushed. You have self-sufficiency that needs to be demolished. You have comfort that needs to be disturbed. You have fears that need to be faced. You have idols that need to be smashed.

And none of those things will go away on their own. They're not like dandelions that die in the winter. They're perennials. They come back. Every spring. Stronger than before.

The only way to remove them is with the knife.

The Father loves you too much to leave you in your uselessness. He has plans for you. He has fruit for you to bear. He has a harvest that only you can produce.

But you can't produce that harvest with all that junk still attached to you. So He cuts. Not because He's mad. Because He needs you to be useful. Because the world is dying and the harvest is plentiful and the workers are few and He wants you to be a worker, not a spectator.

He's not mad at you. He's recruiting you.

The Lies That Keep You from Trusting the Father

Let me name the lies. Because you're believing them. I know you are. I believed them too.

Lie #1: The Father is harsh and demanding.

You think of the Father as the stern one. The one who's hard to please. The one who's always disappointed. The one who requires perfection. The one who punishes every mistake.

And you think of Jesus as the nice one. The one who protects you from the Father. The one who stands between you and God's anger.

That's not Christianity. That's mythology.

Jesus said, *"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."* (John 14:9)

The Father is exactly like Jesus. Not almost like Jesus. Not sort of like Jesus. Exactly like Jesus. The same compassion. The same mercy. The same patience. The same love. The same willingness to forgive.

The cross was not Jesus convincing the Father to love you. The cross was the Father demonstrating His love for you. *"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Romans 5:8)

The Father sent the Son. The Father planned the cross. The Father loved you first.

He's not harsh. He's not demanding. He's not hard to please. He's a Father. And He loves you.

Lie #2: The Father is keeping score.

You think God has a ledger. Every sin recorded. Every failure noted. Every mistake filed away. And one day, He's going to open the books and hold you accountable for everything.

That's not the gospel. That's the opposite of the gospel.

The gospel says that your sins are forgiven. Not overlooked. Not minimized. Not excused. *Forgiven*. Legally, actually, permanently forgiven. The ledger has been destroyed. The record has been erased. The case has been closed.

"He cancelled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:14)

Nailed to the cross. With Jesus. Dead and buried. Never to be opened again.

The Father is not keeping score. He's not tallying your failures. He's not waiting for you to mess up so He can punish you.

He's a Father. And He loves you.

Lie #3: The Father is waiting for you to fail.

You think God is looking for reasons to be disappointed in you. That He's watching your every move, waiting for you to slip up, eager to say, "I told you so."

That's not the Father. That's the enemy. The accuser. The one who is called "the accuser of the brothers" (Revelation 12:10). He's the one who wants you to believe that God is just waiting to condemn you.

But the Father is not the accuser. He's the advocate. He's the one who sent His Son to defend you. He's the one who says, *"There is therefore now no condemnation."*

He's not waiting for you to fail. He's waiting for you to succeed. He's rooting for you. He's on your side. He's for you, not against you.

"If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

He's a Father. And He loves you.

Lie #4: The Father is angry at you.

This is the biggest lie. The one that has caused the most damage.

You think God is angry. That every difficulty in your life is evidence of His displeasure. That the knife is His way of saying, "You deserve this."

But look at the cross. Look at Jesus. Look at the Father pouring out His wrath on His own Son so that you would never have to experience it.

If the Father were angry at you, would He have done that? Would He have sacrificed His only Son to save you from His anger?

No. He would have just been angry. He would have just punished you. He would have just left you in your sin.

But He didn't. He couldn't. Because He's not angry at you. He loves you. He's always loved you. He will always love you.

The cross is not proof of His anger. The cross is proof of His love.

He's not mad at you. He's a Father. And He loves you.

What the Father Actually Feels Toward You

Let me tell you what the Father actually feels toward you. Not what you've been taught. Not what your guilt tells you. What the Bible actually says.

He feels compassion.

"As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." (Psalm 103:13)

When you struggle, He doesn't roll His eyes. He doesn't say, "Get it together." He has compassion. He feels your pain. He knows your frame. He remembers that you are dust.

He feels delight.

"The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." (Zephaniah 3:17)

God sings over you. Loudly. With joy. Not because you're perfect. Because you're His. And He delights in you.

He feels affection.

"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." (1 John 3:1)

Kind of love is weak. The Greek word is *potapen*, which means "from what country?" It's a word of astonishment. "Look at this love! Where did this come from? This is not normal love. This is otherworldly love. This is divine love."

That's how the Father loves you. With a love that is astonishing, inexplicable, supernatural.

He feels eagerness.

"While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

The prodigal son hadn't even made it home. He was still a long way off. But the father saw him. And ran. Not walked. Not strolled. Ran.

The Father is not waiting for you to clean yourself up. He's not standing at a distance with His arms crossed. He's running toward you. Eager to embrace you.

Desperate to welcome you home.

That's how the Father feels toward you.

Not anger. Not disappointment. Not impatience. Not harshness.

Compassion. Delight. Affection. Eagerness.

He's a Father. And He loves you.

Why the Knife Is Proof of Love

Now let me bring this back to the knife.

If the Father loves you this much, why does He cut you? Why does He prune you? Why does He allow suffering in your life?

Because He loves you. Because He's a good Father. Because good fathers discipline their children.

"For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:6)

Not "the Lord punishes the one he's angry at." *Disciplines the one he loves.*

The Greek word is *paideuo*. It means to train, to educate, to instruct, to correct. It's the word used for what parents do with their children. Not punishment. Training.

You train your children because you love them. You correct them because you want what's best for them. You discipline them because you see their potential and you want them to reach it.

The Father does the same with you.

The knife is not His anger. The knife is His training. The cuts are not punishment. They're correction. The pain is not wrath. It's love.

"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:11)

Seems painful. Not is punishment. Seems painful. Because it is painful. But the pain is not the point. The fruit is the point.

The Father is not trying to make you suffer. He's trying to make you fruitful. And fruitfulness requires training. And training requires the knife.

He's not mad at you. He's making you useful.

A Letter to the One Who Thinks God Is Angry

Let me speak directly to you.

You've been living under a cloud. A cloud of guilt, of fear, of uncertainty. You believe that God is angry at you. That He's disappointed in you. That He's waiting for you to mess up so He can punish you.

You've been trying to earn His approval. To be good enough. To pray enough. To read enough. To serve enough. To give enough. You've been running on a treadmill that never stops, never rests, never says, "Well done."

And you're exhausted. Not just physically. Spiritually. Emotionally. You're tired of trying to please a God who seems impossible to please. Tired of performing for a Father who never applauds. Tired of dancing for a King who never smiles.

Let me tell you something.

You have it backwards.

The Father is not angry at you. He's already poured out His anger on Jesus. There's none left for you. None. Zero.

The Father is not disappointed in you. He knew what you would be when He chose you. He wasn't surprised by your sin. He wasn't shocked by your failures. He chose

you anyway. With full knowledge. With open eyes. With a complete understanding of exactly how messy you would be.

The Father is not waiting for you to mess up. He's waiting for you to come home. To stop running. To stop performing. To stop trying to earn what He's already given.

He's not holding a knife, ready to punish you. He's holding a knife, ready to prune you. Not because He's angry. Because He sees what you can become. And He loves you too much to leave you where you are.

The knife is love. The cut is grace. The pain is preparation.

He's not mad at you. He's making you useful.

Will you let Him?

Chapter 13: Asking Whatever You Wish (The Verse Nobody Should Quote Without the First Half)

I need to talk about a verse that has been abused more than almost any other in Scripture.

You've seen it. On Instagram. On a coffee mug. On a billboard. On a T-shirt. On a Bible cover. On a bumper sticker.

"Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." (John 15:7)

That's the version everyone quotes. The version that sells books and fills conferences and launches ministries. The version that makes Christianity look like a cosmic vending machine. Put in a prayer, get out a miracle.

But that's not the verse. That's half the verse. That's the verse with the prerequisite removed. That's the verse with the condition amputated.

Here's the actual verse. Read it carefully.

"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Do you see it? The "if" clause. The condition. The prerequisite.

*If you abide in me.
And my words abide in you.*

Then ask whatever you wish.

Not before. Not without. Not "just believe hard enough." Not "say the right words with enough faith."

If you abide. If my words abide.

Then ask.

The promise is real. The promise is magnificent. The promise is staggering. But the promise is conditional. And the condition is not something you can manufacture in a moment of desperation. The condition is a life. A life of abiding. A life of dwelling.

A life of remaining. A life of staying connected to the Vine until His words have saturated your soul so completely that your wishes are no longer your own.

That's the verse nobody wants to quote. Because the first half is hard. The first half takes years. The first half requires pruning.

But the first half is the only reason the second half is safe.

The Problem with "Ask Whatever You Wish"

Let me tell you why God can't just give you whatever you wish.

Because your wishes are broken.

Not all of them. Some of them are good. Some of them are pure. Some of them align with God's will. But many of them—most of them, if you're honest—are selfish, short-sighted, sinful, or simply stupid.

You wish for things that would hurt you. You wish for things that would destroy you. You wish for things that would lead you away from God. You wish for things that would satisfy your flesh but starve your soul. You wish for things that would feel good in the moment but ruin you in the long run.

If God gave you everything you wished for, you would be miserable. Not because God is withholding. Because you don't know what you're asking for. You're a child asking for candy for every meal. You're a toddler asking for the sharp knife. You're a teenager asking for the keys to the car before you've learned to drive.

You don't know what you want. Not really. Not deeply. Not eternally.

So God, in His mercy, doesn't give you whatever you wish. He gives you what you would wish if you were wise. He gives you what you will wish when you've been pruned. He gives you what you would ask for if His words were abiding in you.

The problem is not God's willingness to give. The problem is your willingness to abide.

The Prerequisite: Abiding and Indwelling

Let me break down the condition.

"If you abide in me..."

Abiding is not a feeling. It's not a spiritual experience. It's not a momentary encounter. It's a sustained, intentional, daily choice to remain connected to Jesus.

Abiding means staying. When it's hard. When it's boring. When it's painful. When you don't feel anything. When God seems silent. When the pruning hurts. When the knife is deep.

Abiding means not running. Not to other vines. Not to counterfeit saviours. Not to the world's solutions. Not to your own strategies. Staying. Remaining. Dwelling.

Abiding means making your home in Christ. Not visiting. Not vacationing. Not dropping in for Sunday services and then leaving. Living there. Breathing there. Sleeping there. Waking up there. Eating there. Working there. Resting there.

Abiding is not a sprint. It's not even a marathon. It's a life. A long, slow, steady life of staying connected to the Vine.

"...and my words abide in you..."

This is the second part. The part everyone forgets.

Not just abiding in Jesus. His words abiding in you. Dwelling in you. Taking up residence in your heart, your mind, your will, your affections.

This is not the same as reading your Bible. Reading is input. Abiding is absorption. Reading is eating. Abiding is digesting. Reading is hearing. Abiding is obeying.

When Jesus' words abide in you, they shape you. They form you. They change what you want, what you love, what you fear, what you hope for. They rewrite your desires from the inside out. They recalibrate your wishes so that they align with God's will.

This is why the early church didn't need a "how to know God's will" seminar. They were so saturated with Scripture that God's will was obvious. They didn't have to guess. They didn't have to hunt for signs. They just knew. Because His words were abiding in them.

The same can be true for you. But it takes time. It takes pruning. It takes the slow, steady work of saturating your soul with Scripture until His words are more familiar than your own thoughts.

What Happens When You Abide

Here's what the abiding life looks like.

Your wishes change.

Not overnight. Not dramatically. Slowly. Imperceptibly. Like a river carving a canyon. Day by day, week by week, year by year, your desires shift. The things you used to crave lose their appeal. The things you used to ignore become precious.

You stop wishing for comfort and start wishing for character.
You stop wishing for ease and start wishing for obedience.
You stop wishing for success and start wishing for fruitfulness.
You stop wishing for recognition and start wishing for holiness.
You stop wishing for your will and start wishing for His.

This doesn't happen because you're trying harder. It happens because you're abiding. The Vine is flowing through you. His life is becoming your life. His desires are becoming your desires.

Your prayers change.

Not the words. The content. The direction. The goal.

You stop praying, "God, give me what I want." You start praying, "God, show me what You want." You stop praying, "God, fix my circumstances." You start praying, "God, use my circumstances to fix me." You stop praying, "God, take away the knife." You start praying, "God, let the knife do its work."

Your prayers become less about getting things from God and more about getting God. Less about your comfort and more about His glory. Less about escaping the prison and more about being faithful in it.

Your perspective changes.

You stop seeing pruning as punishment. You start seeing it as preparation. You stop seeing waiting as wasted time. You start seeing it as training. You stop seeing suffering as the enemy. You start seeing it as the pathway to fruit.

You begin to understand that the Vinedresser knows what He's doing. Not just believe it. Understand it. Feel it. Live it.

This is what abiding produces. Not a life without problems. A life with a different relationship to problems. Not a life without pain. A life where pain produces fruit instead of bitterness. Not a life without the knife. A life where the knife is welcome because it means the Vinedresser hasn't given up.

What Happens When You Ask

Now let me tell you what happens when you ask.

"Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Not "ask whatever you wish, and it might be done." Not "ask whatever you wish, and God will consider it." *It will be done.*

This is a staggering promise. It's almost too big to believe. But it's true. For the one who abides. For the one whose wishes have been pruned and shaped and sanctified.

When you abide, your wishes are no longer random. They're no longer selfish. They're no longer short-sighted. They're aligned with God's will. They're in harmony with His purposes. They're the natural expression of His life flowing through you.

So when you ask, you're not asking for something outside of God's will. You're asking for what He already wants to give. You're not twisting His arm. You're cooperating with His plan. You're not trying to change His mind. You're agreeing with His heart.

And He says yes. Not because you twisted His arm. Because you finally stopped asking for things He needed to say no to.

This is why the early church could pray with such confidence. They weren't guessing. They weren't hoping. They knew. They abided. His words abided in them. Their wishes were His wishes. So when they asked, they knew it would be done.

Not because they had special faith. Because they had special abiding.

The Prosperity Gospel Lie

Let me take a moment to address the prosperity gospel. Because it has twisted this verse beyond recognition.

The prosperity gospel says: Claim your healing. Claim your wealth. Claim your breakthrough. Say the right words. Have enough faith. And God will give you whatever you want.

That's not Christianity. That's magic. It's paganism dressed up in Bible verses. It reduces God to a cosmic butler who exists to serve your desires.

The prosperity gospel ignores the "if." It ignores abiding. It ignores the pruning. It ignores the cross. It promises the second half of the verse without the first half. And people believe it because they want what it promises. They want healing. They want wealth. They want breakthrough. They want comfort.

But here's the truth.

The goal of the Christian life is not to get what you want. The goal is to want what God wants. And you don't learn that by claiming promises. You learn it by abiding. By pruning. By suffering. By waiting. By having your wishes broken and reshaped and sanctified over years of faithful obedience.

The prosperity gospel is a shortcut to nowhere. It bypasses the pruning and promises the fruit. It skips the cross and offers the crown. It ignores the knife and guarantees the harvest.

It's a lie. A dangerous, destructive lie that has shipwrecked the faith of millions.

Don't believe it.

The promise is real. But the prerequisite is real too. You want to ask whatever you wish and have it done? Then abide. Let His words abide in you. Let the Vinedresser do His work. Let the knife cut.

Then ask.

What You Would Ask For If You Knew What You Were Asking For

Let me tell you what you would ask for if you were truly abiding.

You would ask for more pruning.

Not because you enjoy pain. Because you've learned that pruning produces fruit. You've seen it in your life. You've experienced the harvest that follows the cutting. So you ask for more. Not masochistically. Expectantly. You ask the Vinedresser to keep cutting because you want to keep bearing fruit.

You would ask for more of God's presence.

Not His presents. His presence. Not what He can give you. Himself. You would ask to know Him more, love Him more, experience Him more. Because you've tasted and seen that the Lord is good, and nothing else compares.

You would ask for more holiness.

Not comfort. Holiness. You would ask to be made more like Jesus, even if it hurts. Even if it costs you. Even if it means more pruning. Because you've learned that holiness is not a burden. It's a treasure. And you want more of it.

You would ask for more fruit.

Not success. Not recognition. Not platform. Fruit. The kind that lasts. The kind that glorifies the Father. The kind that proves you're a disciple. You would ask to bear more fruit, even if it means more cutting.

You would ask for more of God's will.

Not your will. His. You would pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done," and you would mean it. Even when His will is hard. Even when His will doesn't make sense. Even when His will requires the knife.

This is what abiding produces. Not a list of requests for God to fulfil. A heart that wants what God wants. A will that is aligned with His will. A soul that asks not for escape but for transformation.

And when you ask for these things, they will be done. Not because God is a vending machine. Because you're asking for what He's already doing. You're not trying to change His mind. You're joining His mission.

That's the power of abiding prayer.

A Story of Pruned Prayers

Let me tell you about a woman I'll call Sarah.

Sarah had a son. Her only son. She loved him more than anything. And he was far from God. Drugs. Crime. Prison. The whole tragic story.

Sarah prayed for years. Decades. She prayed for God to save her son. To deliver him from addiction. To keep him out of prison. To bring him home.

And God said no.

Not to the salvation. To the timing. To the method. God didn't keep Sarah's son out of prison. He let him go to prison. He didn't deliver him from addiction quickly. He let him struggle for years. He didn't bring him home. He kept him away.

Sarah was confused. Hurt. Angry. She had prayed faithfully. She had believed. She had claimed promises. And God seemed to be ignoring her.

But she kept abiding. She kept reading her Bible. She kept going to church. She kept praying, even when it felt like her prayers were bouncing off the ceiling.

And slowly, over years, her prayers changed.

She stopped praying, "God, get him out of prison." She started praying, "God, meet him in prison." She stopped praying, "God, make him comfortable." She started praying, "God, make him hungry for You." She stopped praying, "God, give me what I want." She started praying, "God, give him what he needs."

Her wishes were pruned. Not because she gave up on her son. Because she started trusting God more than she trusted her own plans.

And then, in the prison, her son met Jesus. Not in a worship service. In a cell. On his knees. Broken. Desperate. Ready to surrender.

He got out of prison. He got clean. He got a job. He got a church. He got a life. He got saved.

Sarah told me later, "If God had answered my early prayers, my son would be lost. I was praying for comfort. God was planning for salvation. I was praying for a quick fix.

God was working on a complete transformation. I was asking for the wrong things. He was pruning my wishes until I started asking for the right things."

That's what abiding does. It prunes your prayers. It cuts away the selfish, short-sighted, fleshly requests until only the eternal, God-honouring, fruit-bearing petitions remain.

And then God says yes. Not because you finally said the right words. Because you finally became the right person. A person who abides. A person whose wishes have been sanctified. A person who asks for what God already wants to give.

How to Know If Your Wishes Are Pruned

Let me give you a diagnostic test. Ask yourself these questions about anything you're praying for.

Question One: Would I still want this if it cost me everything?

If your answer is no, your wish is not pruned. You're asking for a comfortable addition to your life, not a kingdom investment. A pruned wish is one you'd still want even if it required suffering, sacrifice, and loss.

Question Two: Would I still want this if no one ever knew about it?

If your answer is no, your wish is infected with pride. You want the recognition, not the thing itself. A pruned wish is one you'd pursue in secret, with no applause, no platform, no praise.

Question Three: Would I still want this if it meant more pruning?

If your answer is no, you're not ready for the answer. A pruned wish is one that comes with more cutting. More fruit requires more pruning. If you're not willing to be pruned, you're not ready to bear fruit.

Question Four: Would I still want this if it brought glory to God but not to me?

This is the ultimate test. If your wish is for God's glory alone—if you truly don't care who gets the credit, who gets the attention, who gets the reward—then your wish has been pruned. It's safe for God to say yes.

If you can't pass these tests, don't despair. Just keep abiding. Keep letting His words dwell in you. Keep letting the Vinedresser do His work.

Your wishes will be pruned. It takes time. It takes pain. It takes the knife.

But it's worth it.

A Prayer for Pruned Wishes

Let me give you a prayer. Not a magic formula. A template. A way of asking that reflects a pruned heart.

Father, I don't trust my own wishes. They're selfish. They're short-sighted. They're shaped by my fears and my flesh and my foolishness.

So I'm not going to ask You to give me what I want. I'm going to ask You to give me what I would want if I were wise. Give me what I would ask for if Your words were abiding in me. Give me what I would request if I truly abided in Christ.

Prune my wishes. Cut away the selfishness. Cut away the short-sightedness. Cut away the fear. Cut away the pride. Cut away everything that doesn't align with Your will.

And then, when my wishes are Yours, give me what I ask. Not because I deserve it. Because You are faithful. And because You promised that if I abide, and Your words abide in me, I can ask whatever I wish, and it will be done.

I want that promise. But I want the prerequisite more. I want to abide. I want Your words to dwell in me. I want to be pruned until my wishes are Yours.

Do whatever it takes.

In Jesus' name, amen.

That's the prayer of a pruned branch. A branch that has stopped demanding and started trusting. A branch that has stopped asking for comfort and started asking for character. A branch that has stopped fighting the knife and started welcoming it.

Pray that prayer. Mean it.

And then watch what happens when you ask.

PART FIVE:
THE FIRE (AND WHY IT'S NOT FOR YOU)

Chapter 14: The Branches That Burn

We have spent most of this book talking about the knife.

The pruning. The cutting. The pain that produces fruit. The suffering that leads to harvest. The discipline that proves sonship.

And that is right. That is where most of us live. That is the normal Christian life. Pruning. Cutting. Growing. Bleeding. Bearing fruit. Getting cut again.

But I cannot end this book without talking about the fire.

Because Jesus talked about the fire. And if I skip it, I am not preaching His gospel. I am preaching a half-gospel. A comfortable gospel. A gospel that edits out the parts that make us uncomfortable.

And that gospel saves no one.

So let me say what needs to be said. Let me read the verse that most of the church wishes wasn't there. Let me hold up the mirror that no one wants to look into.

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." (John 15:6)

Not "he is gently encouraged to try harder."

Not "he is given another chance next season."

Not "he is sent to a second-tier heaven."

Not "he experiences temporary discomfort before being welcomed back."

Thrown away. Withers. Gathered. Thrown into the fire. Burned.

Five verbs. Five actions. Five stages of judgment.

This is not a metaphor for feeling distant from God. This is not a description of a backslidden Christian who just needs to come back to church. This is not a warning about losing your rewards but keeping your salvation.

This is fire. Real fire. Judgment. Exclusion. Destruction.

And it happens to branches that were *in Him*.

Not branches that never knew Him. Branches *in Him*. Branches that were connected to the vine. Branches that looked like they belonged. Branches that had access to the life of the vine but did not bear fruit.

They were in Him. And they were thrown away.

Let that sink in. Let it sit on your chest like a two-hundred-pound weight. Let it terrify you. Not because God wants you to be terrified. Because terror is sometimes the only thing that will wake you up.

The Branches That Look Like They Belong

This is the most frightening part of the passage.

The branches that are thrown into the fire are not branches from another tree. They are not wild branches that somehow got mixed in with the vine. They are branches *in Him*. Branches that are part of the vine. Branches that share the same life, the same sap, the same connection.

And yet they bear no fruit.

So the Vinedresser does what any good vinedresser does. He removes them. He cuts them out. He throws them away. He burns them.

Not because He is cruel. Because a branch that is connected to the vine but does not bear fruit is worse than useless. It is parasitic. It is drawing life from the vine and giving nothing back. It is taking up space that could be used by a fruitful branch. It is consuming resources that could produce a harvest.

So it must go.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking about eternal security. You're thinking about "once saved, always saved." You're thinking about the passages that seem to promise that no one can snatch you out of the Father's hand. You're thinking about the sealed Holy Spirit. You're thinking about the finished work of the cross.

I'm not here to debate theology. I'm here to read the text.

And the text says: branches *in Him* that do not bear fruit are thrown into the fire and burned.

You can twist that into a pretzel to make it fit your theological system. You can argue about what "in me" really means. You can debate whether these branches were ever truly saved. You can appeal to other passages that seem to say the opposite.

Or you can just believe it. You can let Jesus say what He said. You can let the text stand on its own. You can let the fire be fire.

And you can ask yourself the question that matters more than any theological debate:

Am I bearing fruit?

Not "did I pray a prayer once?"

Not "was I baptized?"

Not "do I go to church?"

Not "do I believe the right doctrines?"

Not "did I have a spiritual experience?"

Am I bearing fruit?

Because if you are not bearing fruit, your connection to the vine is not enough. Your profession of faith is not enough. Your religious activities are not enough. Your orthodoxy is not enough. Your spiritual gifts are not enough. Your ministry success is not enough.

Only fruit proves that you are a disciple. (John 15:8)

Only fruit demonstrates that your connection to the vine is real. (Matthew 7:16-20)

Only fruit will save you from the fire.

The Gathering

Notice something about verse 6.

"The branches are gathered."

Not "the branch is thrown away individually." The branches are *gathered*. Collected. Assembled. Brought together.

This is a picture of judgment. Not random, scattered destruction. Deliberate, organized, final separation. The fruitless branches are gathered together, and then they are thrown into the fire.

There is a gathering coming. A great gathering. The angels will gather the elect from the four winds. (Matthew 24:31) And the angels will also gather the fruitless branches for the fire. (Matthew 13:40-42)

Everyone will be gathered. No one will be left behind. No one will slip through the cracks. No one will be forgotten.

The question is not whether you will be gathered. The question is where you will be gathered. To the harvest or to the fire. To the barn or to the burn pile. To the King or to the flames.

Which gathering will you be in?

The Fire

Let me talk about the fire.

Not because I want to. Because I have to. Because Jesus talked about the fire. And if Jesus talked about it, I cannot be silent.

The fire is real. It is not a metaphor for emotional pain. It is not a symbol of separation from God. It is not a poetic way of describing annihilation.

It is fire. Real fire. Fire that burns. Fire that consumes. Fire that does not go out. Fire that does not end.

Jesus talked about hell more than He talked about heaven. He described it as a place where *"their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."* (Mark 9:48)

Not a fire that goes out. Not a worm that eventually dies. Eternal. Unending. Forever.

I know that offends modern sensibilities. I know that people say a loving God wouldn't send anyone to hell. I know that the doctrine of eternal punishment is unpopular.

I don't care. I didn't invent it. I didn't vote on it. I'm just reporting it. Jesus said it. Jesus meant it. And Jesus is the same Jesus who died for sinners and rose from the dead and offers forgiveness to all who repent and believe.

He is the one who talked about the fire.

So the fire is real. The fire is terrible. The fire is forever.

And the fire is for branches that do not bear fruit.

The Deception of the Fruitless Branch

Let me speak to the fruitless branch.

You are deceived. Not obviously. Not dramatically. Deceived quietly, subtly, comfortably.

You believe that because you are connected to the vine—because you go to church, because you call yourself a Christian, because you prayed a prayer, because you were baptized, because you believe the right things—you are safe.

But you are not bearing fruit.

Your life does not look like Jesus. Not a little. Not in some areas. Not occasionally. You are not becoming more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more patient, more kind, more good, more faithful, more gentle, more self-controlled. You are the same person you were five years ago. Ten years ago. Twenty years ago.

Maybe worse.

You are not on mission. You are not sharing your faith. You are not making disciples. You are not investing your time, your money, your energy in the kingdom of God. You are consuming religious content and calling it growth. You are attending services and calling it obedience. You are nodding along with sermons and calling it transformation.

But there is no fruit.

And you have convinced yourself that fruit doesn't matter. That God looks at the heart. That salvation is by faith alone, not by works. That grace covers everything.

And you are right. Grace does cover everything. Faith alone saves. Works do not earn salvation.

But the faith that saves is not a dead faith. It is a living faith. A faith that produces fruit. A faith that transforms. A faith that obeys. A faith that looks like Jesus.

"Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:17)

Dead faith does not save. Dead faith is not faith at all. It is intellectual agreement. It is religious sentiment. It is spiritual nostalgia. It is not saving faith.

Saving faith produces fruit. Not perfectly. Not consistently. Not without struggle. But really. Observably. Measurably.

If there is no fruit, there is no saving faith. And if there is no saving faith, there is the fire.

I'm not saying this to be cruel. I'm saying it because I love you. Because I don't want you to be gathered for the fire. Because I want you to examine yourself, to test yourself, to see whether you are in the faith. (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Because the deception of the fruitless branch is the most dangerous deception in the world. It leads people to believe they are safe when they are not. It leads people to think they are in the vine when they are about to be thrown away. It leads people to sing about heaven while walking toward hell.

Don't be deceived.

Examine your fruit.

The Difference Between Struggling and Fruitless

Let me make a crucial distinction.

Struggling is not the same as fruitless.

You may be struggling. You may be fighting. You may be failing. You may be falling. You may be crying out to God, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)

That is not fruitless. That is a branch that is alive, connected, and fighting to bear fruit.

Fruitless is not struggling. Fruitless is not fighting. Fruitless is not caring. Fruitless is comfortable. Fruitless is complacent. Fruitless is indifferent.

The struggling branch is bleeding. The fruitless branch is not even connected enough to bleed.

The struggling branch is crying out for help. The fruitless branch doesn't know it needs help.

The struggling branch is in the fight. The fruitless branch has surrendered.

So don't confuse your struggles with fruitlessness. Your struggles may be the very evidence that you are alive. Your failures may be the very proof that you are fighting. Your tears may be the very sign that you are connected.

Keep struggling. Keep fighting. Keep crying out. That is not the path to the fire. That is the path to fruit.

But if you have stopped struggling—if you have made peace with your sin, if you have stopped fighting, if you are comfortable in your complacency—then you should be terrified.

Because the fruitless branch is the branch that burns.

A Wake-Up Call

Let me say something directly to some of you.

You have been in church for years. Decades. You know the songs. You know the sermons. You know the Bible stories. You know the right answers.

But your life is unchanged.

You still gossip. You still lust. You still lie. You still covet. You still rage. You still hoard. You still envy. You still indulge. You still avoid. You still excuse. You still justify. You still hide.

You have not grown. You have not matured. You have not become more like Jesus. You have become more like the world. More comfortable with sin. More distant from holiness. More cynical about the church. More critical of others. More blind to your own faults.

And you have convinced yourself that this is normal. That everyone struggles. That God understands. That grace covers it.

Grace does cover it. But grace also transforms it. The grace that does not transform is not grace. It is a license to sin. And a license to sin is not the gospel. It is the enemy of the gospel.

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2)

By no means is weak. The Greek is *genoito*, which means "absolutely not" or "God forbid." It is the strongest possible negation. Paul is saying, "Don't even think about it. That's not how grace works. Grace doesn't give you permission to sin. Grace gives you power to stop sinning."

If you have been continuing in sin, presuming on grace, comfortable in your fruitlessness—wake up.

The fire is real. The gathering is coming. The branches that do not bear fruit will be thrown away.

Don't let that be you.

The Hope in the Warning

Now let me give you hope.

The fact that you are reading this book—the fact that you have made it this far—the fact that you are still here, still reading, still considering—that is not an accident.

The Holy Spirit is at work. He is convicting you. He is waking you up. He is disturbing your complacency. He is shaking you out of your deception.

This is grace. This is mercy. This is the Vinedresser's patience.

He hasn't thrown you away yet. He hasn't gathered you for the fire yet. He is still giving you time. Still giving you opportunity. Still giving you chances to bear fruit.

That's not permission to keep sinning. That's an invitation to repent.

"The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."
(2 Peter 3:9)

He is patient. He is waiting. He is giving you time.

Not so you can keep being fruitless. So you can repent. So you can turn. So you can start bearing fruit. So you can be saved from the fire.

Today is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2)

Not tomorrow. Not next week. Not when you feel more ready. Today.

Turn from your sin. Trust in Christ. Abide in the vine. Bear fruit.

The fire is real. But so is the mercy. So is the grace. So is the patience. So is the opportunity.

Don't waste it.

What to Do If You Are a Fruitless Branch

If you have read this chapter and realized that you are the fruitless branch—that you have been connected to the vine in name only, that you have not been bearing fruit, that you have been deceived—here is what you need to do.

First, stop pretending.

Stop pretending that everything is fine. Stop pretending that your lack of fruit doesn't matter. Stop pretending that you're just in a season. Stop pretending that God is okay with your complacency.

Be honest. With yourself. With God. With someone you trust.

Say it out loud: "I am a fruitless branch. I have been connected to the vine, but I have not been bearing fruit. I am in danger of the fire."

Confession is the first step toward fruit.

Second, repent.

Not just feel bad. Repent. Turn around. Change direction. Stop doing what you've been doing. Start doing what you should have been doing.

Repentance is not a feeling. It's a decision. It's a choice. It's a turning.

Turn from your sin. Turn from your complacency. Turn from your self-deception. Turn toward Christ. Turn toward obedience. Turn toward fruitfulness.

Third, abide.

You can't bear fruit on your own. You never could. That's why you've been fruitless. You've been trying to produce fruit in your own strength, for your own glory, on your own terms.

Stop trying. Start abiding.

Connect to the vine. Stay connected. Remain. Dwell. Make your home in Christ. Read His Word. Pray His prayers. Obey His commands. Follow His leading. Stay. Stay. Stay.

The fruit will come. Not because you try harder. Because the vine produces fruit through the branch.

Fourth, submit to the knife.

You have been avoiding the knife. Protecting yourself. Pulling away from the cut. That's why you're fruitless.

Let the Vinedresser cut. Let Him prune. Let Him remove whatever is in the way of fruit. Sin. Idols. Ego. Relationships. Comfort. Everything.

It will hurt. It will bleed. You will want to pull away.

Don't.

The knife is the only thing that can save you from the fire.

A Final Word

I want to end this chapter with the words of Jesus. Not my words. His.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit... If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

That's the text.

The knife or the fire. Pruning or burning. Fruit or flames.

Choose.

Not because you can earn your salvation. You can't. But because the faith that saves is the faith that abides. And the faith that abides is the faith that bears fruit. And the faith that bears fruit is the faith that avoids the fire.

Not by works. By grace. Through faith. Unto fruit.

That's the gospel. That's the whole gospel.

That's the only gospel.

Don't settle for a half-gospel that edits out the fire. Don't let anyone tell you that fruit doesn't matter. Don't believe the lie that you can be connected to the vine and bear nothing and still be safe.

The text is clear.

The branches that burn are the branches that don't bear fruit.

Bear fruit.

Chapter 15:

What the Modern Church Gets Wrong About Almost Everything

I have spent fourteen chapters telling you what the Bible says about pruning, fruitfulness, obedience, and fire.

Now I need to tell you why you haven't heard most of it before.

Not because the Bible is hidden. Not because the truth is hard to find. Not because the Holy Spirit stopped speaking.

Because the modern church has traded the uncomfortable truth for a comfortable lie. And most of you have been raised on that lie. You've been fed spiritual junk food your entire lives, and you don't even know what a real meal tastes like anymore.

I'm not going to be gentle in this chapter. Gentle is what got us here. Gentle is what allowed the lie to take root. Gentle is what made the church weak, anaemic, and indistinguishable from the world.

So I'm going to name names. I'm going to call out the false teachings. I'm going to shine a light on the garbage that has been passed off as Christianity.

And I'm going to do it with the same knife that has been cutting through this entire book. Not because I enjoy controversy. Because I love the church. And you don't save a patient by patting them on the head while cancer eats them from the inside.

You cut.

The Lie of the Easy Gospel

Let me start with the biggest lie.

The lie that the gospel is easy. That following Jesus is simple. That salvation is a one-time prayer that guarantees a painless eternity regardless of how you live.

This lie is preached from thousands of pulpits every Sunday. It's sung in hundreds of worship songs. It's written in dozens of bestselling books. It's the default setting of American Christianity.

The easy gospel says: Pray this prayer. Believe these facts. Go to church occasionally. Try to be a good person. And you're in. Heaven is guaranteed. Hell is impossible. Your eternity is secure no matter what you do.

The easy gospel has no pruning. No knife. No fire. No warnings. No uncomfortable commands. No cross. No death. No surrender.

The easy gospel is a gospel without cost. And a gospel without cost is a gospel without power. It saves no one because it calls no one to leave anything. It offers heaven without holiness, forgiveness without transformation, grace without fruit.

And it's a lie.

Jesus never preached the easy gospel. He said, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* (Matthew 16:24)

A cross is not a metaphor for a difficult boss or a challenging marriage. A cross is an instrument of execution. Taking up your cross means dying. Dying to your plans. Your dreams. Your rights. Your comfort. Your reputation. Your life.

That's not easy. That's not simple. That's not a one-time prayer.

That's a lifetime of daily death. Daily surrender. Daily obedience. Daily pruning.

The easy gospel is a lie. And if you have been raised on it, you have been malnourished. Starved for the truth. Fed cotton candy while your soul wasted away.

The real gospel is hard. It costs everything. It demands everything. It prunes everything.

But it produces fruit. Real fruit. Eternal fruit.

The easy gospel produces nothing but false converts and fruitless branches. Branches that are connected in name only. Branches that are destined for the fire.

Stop believing the lie. The gospel is not easy. It never was. It never will be.

The Lie of Your Best Life Now

The prosperity gospel is not a harmless deviation from orthodoxy. It is a damnable heresy that mocks the cross and leads millions to hell.

The prosperity gospel says: God wants you rich. God wants you healthy. God wants you successful. God wants you comfortable. If you have enough faith, if you sow enough seeds, if you confess enough promises, God will give you the desires of your heart.

This is not Christianity. This is paganism with Bible verses. This is the worship of mammon dressed up in spiritual language. This is the American Dream with Jesus as a means to an end.

The prosperity gospel has no room for the knife. No room for pruning. No room for suffering. No room for the cross. No room for the apostle Paul, who was beaten, imprisoned, starving, and eventually executed. No room for Jesus, who had nowhere to lay His head and died a criminal's death.

The prosperity gospel is a lie. A dangerous, destructive, demonic lie.

Jesus said, *"In the world you will have tribulation."* (John 16:33)

Not "you might have tribulation if you don't have enough faith." *You will have tribulation.*

Paul said, *"All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* (2 Timothy 3:12)

Not "might be persecuted." *Will be persecuted.*

Peter said, *"Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you."* (1 Peter 4:12)

Not "if it comes." *When it comes.*

The Bible never promises your best life now. It promises your best life later. In the age to come. In the new heavens and the new earth. After the resurrection. After the pruning. After the suffering. After the cross.

Now is the time of the knife. Later is the time of the fruit.

Stop believing the lie that God wants you comfortable. He wants you holy. He wants you fruitful. And holiness and fruitfulness come through the knife, not through comfort.

The Lie of Deconstruction Without Reconstruction

The deconstruction movement is not entirely wrong. Some things need to be deconstructed. Bad theology needs to be torn down. False teachings need to be exposed. Unbiblical traditions need to be abandoned.

But deconstruction without reconstruction is not reformation. It is demolition. And demolition without rebuilding leaves a pile of rubble.

Too many young Christians have been told to question everything. To doubt everything. To tear down everything they were taught. But no one has told them what to put in its place. So they wander in the rubble, homeless and hungry, convinced that they're being honest but not realizing that they're being destroyed.

Deconstruction without the knife is not pruning. It is uprooting. Pruning removes what is dead or damaging so that the branch can bear more fruit. Uprooting removes the branch from the vine entirely.

The deconstruction movement has uprooted thousands of young Christians. It has convinced them that the church is corrupt, the Bible is unreliable, and the faith they inherited is a lie. And it has given them nothing to replace it. Nothing but doubt, cynicism, and the slow death of spiritual homelessness.

If you are deconstructing, let me ask you: What are you building? What are you putting in place of what you're tearing down? If you're just tearing down, you're not deconstructing. You're destroying. And destruction without creation is the work of the enemy, not the Holy Spirit.

The knife prunes. It does not uproot.

Don't confuse the two.

The Lie of Therapeutic Christianity

The therapeutic church has replaced sin with sickness, repentance with recovery, and the cross with self-esteem.

In the therapeutic church, you are not a sinner in need of a Saviour. You are a victim in need of healing. You are not rebellious. You are wounded. You are not disobedient. You are traumatized.

The answer is not the gospel. The answer is therapy. Not the cross. Coping strategies. Not repentance. Self-care. Not obedience. Boundaries.

The therapeutic church has no room for the knife because the knife would hurt. And the therapeutic church believes that feeling good is more important than being holy. That comfort is more important than character. That self-esteem is more important than self-denial.

The therapeutic church is a lie. Not because therapy is bad. Not because healing is unimportant. Not because trauma isn't real.

But because the deepest problem of the human heart is not trauma. It is sin. And the deepest solution is not therapy. It is the cross.

The cross offends the therapeutic church because the cross says you are worse than you think. Not just wounded. Dead. Not just traumatized. Rebellious. Not just in need of healing. In need of resurrection.

The therapeutic church wants to make you feel better. The cross wants to make you dead. Dead to sin. Dead to self. Dead to the world. Dead to your old life.

And then alive in Christ. Alive to righteousness. Alive to obedience. Alive to fruitfulness.

The therapeutic church offers a bandage. The cross offers a knife. The therapeutic church offers a coping mechanism. The cross offers a crucifixion.

Don't settle for therapy when you need the gospel.

The Lie of the Gospel of Affirmation

The affirmation gospel says: God loves you just as you are. He accepts you. He affirms you. He doesn't want you to change. He just wants you to be yourself.

This is half true. God does love you just as you are. But He loves you too much to leave you just as you are.

The affirmation gospel stops at acceptance. It never moves to transformation. It celebrates identity without calling to repentance. It affirms who you are without calling you to die.

That's not the gospel. The gospel says, "*You must be born again.*" (John 3:7)

Not "you must be affirmed." *Born again.* Which means dying to your old self and coming alive to a new self. Which means change. Radical, total, comprehensive change.

The affirmation gospel wants you to stay the same. The real gospel wants you to die. And then live.

The affirmation gospel celebrates your current identity. The real gospel tells you to crucify your identity and take on the identity of Christ.

The affirmation gospel says, "Be yourself." The real gospel says, "*Deny yourself.*"

The affirmation gospel is a lie. It is not good news. It is a tranquilizer for the conscience, keeping you comfortable in your sin while you drift toward the fire.

God loves you as you are. But He loves you too much to leave you there. He brings the knife. He prunes. He cuts. He changes.

Don't settle for affirmation when you need transformation.

The Lie of the Political Kingdom

The political church has traded the gospel for a party platform. It has replaced the Great Commission with the culture war. It has exchanged the kingdom of God for the kingdom of this world.

The political church believes that the answer to the world's problems is legislation, not regeneration. That the solution is power, not the gospel. That the enemy is the other party, not sin.

The political church has made an idol out of politics. It has baptized partisanship. It has wrapped the flag around the cross and called it Christianity.

This is idolatry. Pure and simple.

Jesus didn't come to establish a political kingdom. He said, "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" (John 18:36)

He didn't run for office. He didn't organize a political movement. He didn't try to take over the Roman government. He died on a cross, rose from the dead, and built His kingdom one converted heart at a time.

The political church has forgotten that. It spends its energy on worldly power while the world goes to hell. It fights for temporary victories while souls are lost forever.

The political church needs the knife. It needs to have its political idol cut out. It needs to remember that the kingdom of God is not advanced by legislation but by regeneration. Not by voting but by evangelism. Not by power but by the gospel.

Stop putting your hope in politics. Stop believing that the answer is a candidate or a law or a Supreme Court ruling. The answer is Jesus. It has always been Jesus. It will always be Jesus.

And Jesus didn't die to make America great. He died to save sinners. From every nation. Not just yours.

The political kingdom is a lie. Don't trade the eternal kingdom for a temporary one.

The Lie of the Spectator Church

The spectator church believes that Christianity is something you watch. You go to church. You listen to sermons. You sing songs. You watch others serve. You observe others give. You admire others share their faith.

But you don't do any of it yourself.

The spectator church has turned Christianity into a performance. The pastors perform on the stage. The worship team performs in the front. And the congregation watches. Consumes. Evaluates. Critiques.

But they don't participate. They don't serve. They don't give. They don't share. They don't make disciples. They don't bear fruit.

They are spectators. And spectators are not disciples.

Jesus didn't say, "Watch me." He said, "*Follow me.*" (Matthew 4:19)

He didn't invite spectators. He invited participants. He didn't call consumers. He called labourers. He didn't commission an audience. He commissioned workers.

The spectator church is a lie. Christianity is not a sport. You don't sit in the stands and cheer for the professionals. You get on the field. You get in the game. You get cut. You get bruised. You get tired. You get fruit.

The spectator church needs the knife. It needs to be cut out of its comfortable seats and thrown into the harvest. It needs to stop watching and start doing. It needs to stop evaluating and start serving. It needs to stop critiquing and start participating.

Are you a spectator? Or are you a disciple? You can't be both.

The Lie of the Celebrity Pastor

The celebrity pastor phenomenon is a symptom of the spectator church. It elevates a few gifted communicators to superstar status while the rest of the body atrophies.

The celebrity pastor is not inherently evil. But the system that creates and sustains celebrity pastors is deeply flawed. It creates a clergy-laity divide that is unbiblical. It encourages spiritual passivity in the congregation. It breeds pride and corruption in the pastor.

The New Testament knows nothing of celebrity pastors. It knows of elders. Servants. Shepherds. Men who lead not by lording it over those entrusted to them but by being examples to the flock. (1 Peter 5:3)

The celebrity pastor needs the knife. Not because they're bad. Because they're in danger. The same danger that caught King David, King Solomon, and countless others. The danger of pride. The danger of power. The danger of the spotlight.

And the congregation needs the knife too. It needs to stop worshiping pastors and start becoming disciples. It needs to stop depending on a few gifted speakers and start discovering its own gifts. It needs to stop paying for entertainment and start participating in ministry.

The celebrity pastor is a lie. Not because pastors shouldn't be gifted. Not because preachers shouldn't be anointed. But because the system turns servants into stars, and stars are not what the church needs.

The church needs faithful shepherds. And it needs faithful sheep who don't need to be entertained.

The Lie of the Seeker-Sensitive Service

The seeker-sensitive movement was not entirely wrong. It correctly recognized that the church should be accessible. That we shouldn't put unnecessary barriers between people and the gospel. That we should communicate clearly and lovingly.

But the seeker-sensitive movement went too far. It began to remove the offense of the cross. It began to sanitize the gospel. It began to entertain the world instead of confronting it.

The seeker-sensitive service is designed to make unbelievers feel comfortable. But the gospel is not comfortable. The cross is not comfortable. The knife is not comfortable. The fire is not comfortable.

If an unbeliever walks into a church service and never feels uncomfortable, never feels convicted, never feels the weight of their sin, you are not preaching the gospel. You are performing a show.

The seeker-sensitive service needs the knife. It needs to cut out the entertainment. The production. The performance. It needs to get back to preaching the Word. Not relevant talks. Not practical tips. Not life hacks.

The Word. The whole Word. The uncomfortable Word. The Word that cuts. The Word that prunes. The Word that saves.

If you are attending a church where the gospel is never offensive, where the cross is never uncomfortable, where your sin is never confronted, you are not attending a church. You are attending a club. And clubs don't save anyone.

The Lie of the Baptismal Regeneration That Requires Nothing

I need to say something about baptism.

Baptism is important. Baptism is commanded. Baptism is a means of grace. Baptism is the New Testament sign of the covenant.

But baptism is not magic. It is not a fire insurance policy. It does not save you apart from faith. And it certainly does not guarantee fruitfulness.

There are millions of baptized people who are fruitless branches. They were baptized as infants. Or as adults. They went through the motions. They performed the ritual. They checked the box.

And they have never borne fruit. Never grown. Never changed. Never become like Jesus.

Their baptism did not save them. Their ritual did not transform them. Their ceremony did not produce fruit.

The only thing that saves is faith. Living faith. Active faith. Fruit-bearing faith. Faith that abides. Faith that obeys. Faith that endures the knife.

If you are trusting in your baptism to save you, you are deceived. If you are resting on the fact that you were baptized as a baby, or that you were baptized as an adult, or that you were baptized in the right church by the right pastor with the right amount of water—you are trusting in a ritual.

And rituals don't save.

Jesus saves. And He saves through faith. And the faith that saves is the faith that abides. And the faith that abides is the faith that bears fruit.

Don't let your baptism be a substitute for fruitfulness.

The Call to Return to the Text

I have spent this chapter naming lies. I could name many more. But the point is not to catalogue every error in the modern church. The point is to call you back to the text.

The Bible is enough. It is sufficient. It is clear. It is authoritative. It is sharp. It is a sword.

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

The Word cuts. The Word prunes. The Word judges. The Word saves.

You don't need a new revelation. You don't need a fresh word. You don't need a special anointing. You don't need a prophetic movement.

You need the Bible. Read it. Study it. Memorize it. Obey it. Let it abide in you. Let it cut you. Let it prune you. Let it save you from the fire.

The modern church has wandered far from the text. It has replaced the Word with experience, with feeling, with opinion, with tradition, with politics, with entertainment.

It's time to come back.

The knife is still sharp. The Vinedresser is still at work. The Vine is still life. The fruit is still coming. The fire is still real.

Come back to the text.

Let it cut.

The Knife Is Love. Stop Flinching.

We began this book in a bedroom at 2:13 AM, you and I. You were scrolling. I was writing. But we were both doing the same thing. Avoiding the text. Or at least, avoiding the parts of the text that made us uncomfortable.

John 15. The vine. The branches. The pruning.

And the fire.

We have spent fifteen chapters walking through that passage. We have looked at every word. We have sat in every uncomfortable truth. We have faced the knife. We have stared into the fire.

I have not softened a single thing. I have not apologized for the hard parts. I have not explained away the warnings. I have not traded the truth for your comfort.

Because you don't need comfort. You need the truth.

The truth is this:

The Father is the Vinedresser. He holds the knife. He knows what He's doing.

Jesus is the Vine. He is life. He is enough. He is everything.

You are the branch. You are not the vine. You are not the vinedresser. You are the branch. Your job is to abide. To stay. To remain. To endure the knife.

The knife is not punishment. It is pruning. It is preparation. It is love.

The fire is real. The fire is for fruitless branches. The fire is not for you. Not if you abide. Not if you bear fruit.

But the only way to bear fruit is to be pruned. And the only way to be pruned is to stop flinching.

The Question You Must Answer

I have asked you many questions in this book. But there is one question that matters more than all the others. One question that you cannot avoid. One question that will determine everything about your life, your death, and your eternity.

Are you willing to be pruned?

Not "do you believe in pruning?" Not "do you agree with the doctrine of pruning?" Not "can you explain the theology of pruning?"

Are you willing? Are you willing to let the Father bring the knife? Are you willing to let Him cut away your sin, your idols, your ego, your relationships, your comfort, your plans, your dreams, your very life?

Are you willing to submit to the Vinedresser's hand, even when it hurts? Even when you don't understand? Even when you want to pull away? Even when every instinct screams at you to run?

Are you willing to be pruned?

Not once. Not twice. Not until you've "arrived." For the rest of your life. As long as you are connected to the Vine. As long as the Vinedresser sees more fruit that needs to be grown.

Are you willing?

Because if you are not willing, you have two options.

You can pull away from the Vine. You can disconnect. You can try to find life somewhere else. But Jesus said, *"Apart from me you can do nothing."* So you will wither. And then you will be gathered. And then you will be thrown into the fire. And then you will burn.

That is not a threat. It is a fact. It is what happens to branches that refuse the knife.

Or you can stay connected but refuse the pruning. You can remain attached to the Vine but fight the Vinedresser every time He brings the knife. You can cling to your sin, your idols, your ego, your relationships, your comfort, your plans, your dreams.

But a branch that refuses to be pruned does not bear fruit. It grows leaves. It grows thorns. It grows in the wrong direction. It becomes a tangled mess. It is not useful. It is not fruitful. It is just... there. Taking up space. Consuming resources. Producing nothing.

And eventually, even that branch is removed. Because a vineyard exists for fruit. Not for decoration. Not for sentimentality. Not for nostalgia.

Fruit.

So the question remains. Are you willing to be pruned?

Not "are you willing to be comfortable?" Not "are you willing to be successful?" Not "are you willing to be popular?"

Are you willing to be pruned?

What Pruning Will Cost You

Let me be specific about what you are signing up for.

If you say yes to the knife, you are saying yes to:

The loss of sin you love. The sin you have been cuddling. The sin you have been protecting. The sin you have made peace with. The sin you have named a "struggle" to avoid calling it rebellion. The Vinedresser will cut it out. It will hurt. You will bleed. You will miss it. But you will be free.

The loss of idols you cherish. The good things you turned into gods. The relationships. The career. The money. The reputation. The ministry. The comfort. The Vinedresser will smash them. Not because they are evil. Because they are in His way. And He will not share His glory with another.

The loss of your ego. Your pride. Your self-sufficiency. Your confidence in your own strength. Your belief that you've got this. The Vinedresser will humble you. He will bring you low. He will show you that you are weak. So that His power can rest on you.

The loss of people you love. The relationships that are pulling you away from Him. The friends who are dragging you down. The family members who are toxic. The "Christian" teachers who are leading you astray. The Vinedresser will cut them away. It will feel like amputation. It will leave a wound. But the wound will heal. And you will be healthier without the poison.

The loss of your timeline. Your plans. Your dreams. Your five-year strategy. Your retirement goals. Your "when I finally..." The Vinedresser will make you wait. He will put you in prison. He will hold you in obscurity. He will delay and defer and deny until you learn to trust His timing instead of your own.

The loss of your comfort. Your easy button. Your predictable schedule. Your safe routines. Your insulated life. The Vinedresser will disturb your peace. He will shake your foundations. He will send you into the wilderness. He will make you uncomfortable. Because comfort is the enemy of fruitfulness.

The loss of your reputation. What other people think of you. Your good name. Your standing in the community. Your approval ratings. The Vinedresser will let you be misunderstood. Misrepresented. Maligned. Mocked. Because your reputation is not His priority. Your holiness is.

The loss of your control. Your illusion that you are in charge. Your belief that you can manage your life. Your strategies for staying safe. The Vinedresser will take the wheel. He will drive where you don't want to go. He will park where you don't want to stay. He will lead you where you cannot see. Because control is not yours. It never was.

The loss of your life. Your plans. Your dreams. Your ambitions. Your desires. Your very self. The Vinedresser will ask for everything. And He will not settle for less. Because you cannot follow Jesus and keep your life. You must lose it to find it. You must die to live. You must surrender to win.

That is what pruning costs.

Everything.

Are you still willing?

What Pruning Will Produce

But here is the promise. Here is what you get in exchange for everything you lose.

Freedom. Not the false freedom of doing whatever you want. The real freedom of wanting what you should. The freedom of being free from sin. Free from addiction. Free from idolatry. Free from the endless, exhausting cycle of craving and consuming and craving again. Free to love. Free to serve. Free to worship. Free to be who God created you to be.

Joy. Not the shallow happiness that depends on circumstances. The deep, abiding joy that comes from knowing Christ. The joy that remains even when everything falls apart. The joy that sustained the martyrs. The joy that Jesus had when He faced the cross. The joy that cannot be stolen because it is not based on what you have but on Whose you are.

Peace. Not the absence of conflict. The presence of Christ. The peace that passes understanding. The peace that guards your heart and mind. The peace that allows you to sleep when the storm is raging. The peace that says, "Even if this kills me, I am in His hands."

Purpose. Not the aimless drift of a life spent chasing comfort. The focused, intentional, meaningful life of a branch that is bearing fruit. The knowledge that you are doing what you were made to do. The satisfaction of labouring for the kingdom. The joy of seeing fruit that will last.

Fruit. Real fruit. The fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The fruit of conduct. A life that looks like Jesus. The fruit of mission. Disciples who make disciples. Fruit that remains. Fruit that glorifies the Father. Fruit that proves you are a disciple.

Himself. God. The Father. The Son. The Holy Spirit. The one for whom you were made. The one who satisfies every longing. The one who is better than life. The one who is worth more than everything you could ever lose.

You lose sin. You gain freedom.
You lose idols. You gain joy.
You lose ego. You gain peace.
You lose relationships. You gain purpose.
You lose your timeline. You gain fruit.
You lose comfort. You gain Himself.

Is it worth it?

Only you can answer that question. But I will tell you what I have learned after years of the knife.

It is worth it. Every cut. Every loss. Every tear. Every sleepless night. Every betrayal. Every disappointment. Every closed door. Every broken dream.

It is worth it.

Not because the pain was fun. Because the fruit is glorious. Not because suffering is enjoyable. Because Christ is enough. Not because I am strong. Because He is strong. Not because I never wanted to quit. Because He never let me go.

The knife is love. The cut is grace. The pain is preparation. The loss is gain.

It is worth it. A thousand times over. It is worth it.

A Final Letter to You

I don't know your name. I don't know your face. I don't know your story or your struggle or your sin or your sorrow.

But I know this.

You have been cut. You are being cut. You will be cut again.

The Vinedresser has His knife in your life. He is removing things you wanted to keep. He is pruning things you thought were good. He is cutting away things you thought were permanent.

It hurts. I know it hurts. I have felt it too.

And you are tempted to flinch. To pull away. To protect yourself. To fight the knife. To run from the Vinedresser. To disconnect from the Vine.

Don't.

I know it hurts. But the Vinedresser knows what He is doing. He is not angry. He is not careless. He is not cruel.

He is good. He is wise. He is loving. And He is at work.

The fruit is coming. Not maybe. Not possibly. Not if you get your act together.

The fruit is coming because the Vinedresser is faithful. He does not start a work and abandon it. He does not prune a branch and leave it to wither. He finishes what He starts.

"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6)

The completion is coming. The fruit is coming. The harvest is coming.

But first, the knife.

So I am asking you. Begging you. Pleading with you.

Stop flinching.

Stop fighting the cut. Stop protecting the idol. Stop clinging to the sin. Stop running from the Vinedresser.

Trust Him. He knows what He is doing. He has never made a mistake. He has never cut too deep. He has never pruned a branch He did not intend to keep.

He loves you. That is why He cuts you. He loves you too much to leave you mediocre. He loves you too much to let you stay fruitless. He loves you too much to let you drift toward the fire.

The knife is love.

Stop flinching.

The Prayer of Surrender

Let me give you a prayer. Not a magic formula. Not a one-time prayer that guarantees an easy life. A prayer of surrender. A prayer that you will pray again and again and again, for the rest of your life, every time the knife comes.

Pray it now. Pray it tomorrow. Pray it in the middle of the night when the pain is fresh and the future is dark and you don't know if you can take any more.

Pray it until you mean it. And then pray it again.

Father, I have been fighting the knife. I have been protecting things You want to cut. I have been clinging to things You want to remove. I have been running from the very surgery that could save me.

I stop fighting. I stop protecting. I stop running.

Here is my sin. The sin I have been cuddling. Cut it. It hurts. I will bleed. But cut it. I want to be free.

Here are my idols. The good things I turned into gods. Smash them. Take them. Break them. I want to worship only You.

Here is my ego. My pride. My self-sufficiency. Crush it. Humble me. Make me weak. I want Your power to rest on me.

Here are my relationships. The ones You want to remove. Cut them. Even the ones I love. Even the ones that feel essential. I want to be holy more than I want to be liked.

Here is my timeline. My plans. My dreams. My strategies. Delay me. Deny me. Redirect me. I want Your timing, not mine.

Here is my comfort. My easy button. My safe life. Disturb me. Shake me. Send me where I don't want to go. I want to be fruitful more than I want to be comfortable.

Here is my reputation. What people think of me. My good name. My approval ratings. Take it. Let me be misunderstood. Let me be maligned. Let me be mocked. I want You to be glorified, not me.

Here is my control. My illusion that I am in charge. Take the wheel. Drive where You want. I am not the Vinedresser. You are. I am not the Vine. You are. I am just a branch. And I want to abide.

Here is my life. All of it. Everything I have.

Everything I am. Everything I hope to be. Take it. Cut it. Prune it. Shape it. Use it.

I am Yours. Do whatever You want with me.

The knife is love. I will not flinch.

In Jesus' name, amen.

The Final Word

I have written fifteen chapters. I have said everything I was given to say. I have not held back. I have not softened. I have not apologized.

Now it is between you and the Vinedresser.

He holds the knife. He sees the branch. He knows what He is doing.
The question is not whether He will cut. The question is whether you will stay.

Stay.

Not because it's easy. Because He is good.

Stay.

Not because you understand. Because He is faithful.

Stay.

Not because the pain will end soon. Because the fruit will be worth it.

Stay.

The fire is for fruitless branches. But you are not fruitless. Not if you stay. Not if you abide. Not if you let the Vinedresser do His work.

You will bear fruit. Much fruit. Fruit that remains. Fruit that glorifies the Father. Fruit that proves you are a disciple.

Not because you are strong. Because He is strong.
Not because you never failed. Because He never failed you.
Not because you held on. Because He held on to you.

The knife is love.

The Vinedresser is good.

The Vine is life.

Stay.

Soli Deo Gloria.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Pruning Journal

30 Days of Scripture Readings and Questions

No fluff. No "how did that make you feel?" Just the Word and a scalpel.

Day 1 – The Text Itself

Read John 15:1–8 three times. Out loud. Slowly.

Write down every word that makes you uncomfortable. Do not explain it away. Just write it.

Day 2 – The Vine

Read John 15:1. Then read Isaiah 5:1–7.

What false vines have you attached yourself to? Name them. Be specific.

Day 3 – The Vinedresser

Read John 15:1–2. Then read Hebrews 12:3–11.

Do you believe the Father is good? If yes, why do you flinch when He brings the knife? If no, what has shaped your view of Him?

Day 4 – The Branch

Read John 15:4–5. Then read Psalm 1.

What does "abiding" actually look like in your daily life? Not what it should look like. What it does look like.

Day 5 – Fruitless Branches

Read John 15:2. Then read Matthew 7:15–20.

Are you bearing fruit? Not "have you borne fruit in the past." Are you bearing fruit now? Name three pieces of observable evidence.

Day 6 – Fruitful Branches

Read John 15:2. Then read Galatians 5:22–23.

Which of the fruits of the Spirit are most absent in your life right now? Ask the Father to cut whatever is blocking that fruit.

Day 7 – Pruning

Read John 15:2–3. Then read Genesis 22:1–19.

What is your Isaac? What good thing have you turned into an idol? What are you holding too tightly?

Day 8 – The Knife on Sin

Read Hebrews 12:1. Then read Romans 6:1–14.

What sin have you been cuddling? Stop calling it a struggle. Name it. Confess it. Hand it to the Vinedresser.

Day 9 – The Knife on Idols

Read 1 John 5:19–21. Then read Ezekiel 14:1–8.

List your top three idols. Not "possibilities." The actual things you worry about, daydream about, and get angry about losing.

Day 10 – The Knife on Ego

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1–10. Then read Proverbs 16:18–19.

What is your thorn? What has God said "no" to removing? Have you thanked Him for it yet? If not, write the prayer you would need to pray to get there.

Day 11 – The Knife on Relationships

Read 1 Corinthians 15:33. Then read Proverbs 13:20.

Is there a relationship in your life that is pulling you away from Jesus? What would obedience look like? Boundaries? Distance? A conversation? Complete separation?

Day 12 – The Knife on Comfort

Read Matthew 16:24–26. Then read Luke 9:57–62.

What comfort are you unwilling to surrender? Your bed? Your schedule? Your retirement? Your reputation? Write it down. Now ask: Is it worth more than Jesus?

Day 13 – The Prison

Read Genesis 37, 39–41 (Joseph's story). Then read Psalm 13.

Where are you in the prison right now? Waiting? Suffering? Confused? Forgotten? Write a honest prayer. No polished language. Just your real heart.

Day 14 – More Fruit = More Pruning

Read John 15:2 again. Slowly.

Have you been assuming that fruitfulness leads to ease? How has that lie affected your expectations of God? Write a new expectation based on the actual text.

Day 15 – Why Most Christians Quit

Read Matthew 13:1–23 (the parable of the sower). Then read Hebrews 10:35–39.

Which of the four soils are you right now? Be honest. If you're not the good soil, what needs to change?

Day 16 – Despair

Read Psalm 42. Then read Lamentations 3:19–24.

Have you been sliding into despair? Quiet hopelessness? Numb going-through-the-motions? Ask the Father to renew your hope. Write down one promise you can cling to.

Day 17 – Resistance

Read Jonah 1–2. Then read Acts 9:1–19.

Are you fighting the knife? Resisting the cut? Running from the Vinedresser? Surrender is not weakness. Write out a surrender prayer.

Day 18 – Bitterness

Read Hebrews 12:14–15. Then read Ephesians 4:31–32.

Is there anyone you need to forgive? God?

A pastor? A parent? A spouse? A friend? Yourself? Bitterness is poison. Write down the name. Then write: "I forgive [name]." Say it out loud.

Day 19 – Self-Pity

Read 1 Kings 19 (Elijah's self-pity). Then read Romans 11:29.

Have you been feeling sorry for yourself? Telling yourself you're not gifted, not called, not chosen? That's pride wearing a mask. Stop. Write down what God has actually given you. Count the gifts.

Day 20 – Obedience Is Boring

Read Matthew 6:1–18. Then read Colossians 3:17.

Where have you been chasing the spectacular instead of embracing the boring? Are you willing to obey when no one claps? Write down one "boring" act of obedience you will do today.

Day 21 – The Father Is Not Mad at You

Read Romans 8:1–4. Then read Zephaniah 3:17.

Do you believe the Father is angry at you? Where did that belief come from? Write down the truth from Romans 8:1. Memorize it.

Day 22 – Asking Whatever You Wish

Read John 15:7. Then read James 4:1–3.

What are you asking for? Are your wishes pruned? Or are they selfish? Write down your top three prayer requests. Now ask: Would I still want these if they brought only God glory and not me?

Day 23 – The Branches That Burn

Read John 15:6. Then read Matthew 25:31–46.

Does the fire feel real to you? Or have you made peace with a version of judgment that doesn't frighten you? Ask the Holy Spirit to give you a holy fear.

Day 24 – Examine Your Fruit

Read Matthew 7:21–23. Then read 2 Corinthians 13:5.

Are you bearing fruit? Not in the past. Now. If there is no fruit, today is the day to repent. Write a prayer of repentance. Mean it.

Day 25 – The Modern Church

Read 2 Timothy 4:1–5. Then read Revelation 2:1–7.

Have you been fed lies? Comfortable gospels? Easy Christianity? Ask God to show you what you need to unlearn. Write it down.

Day 26 – Returning to the Text

Read 2 Timothy 3:14–17. Then read Psalm 119:9–16.

Will you commit to reading the Bible for yourself? Not relying on podcasts, sermons, or books? Not skipping the hard parts? Write a commitment. Sign it.

Day 27 – The Cost of the Knife

Read Luke 14:25–33. Then read Philippians 3:7–11.

Are you willing to lose everything? Your sin. Your idols. Your ego. Your relationships. Your comfort. Your reputation. Your life. Write down what you're most afraid to lose. Then surrender it.

Day 28 – The Fruit of the Knife

Read John 15:8. Then read Galatians 5:22–23 again.

What fruit do you want to see in your life? Be specific. Not just "more patience." What would that look like in your marriage, your parenting, your workplace? Write it down. Pray for it. Then submit to the pruning that will produce it.

Day 29 – Stay

Read John 15:9–11. Then read Hebrews 12:1–3.

Are you tempted to quit? Run? Pull away from the vine? Don't. Stay. Write down three reasons to stay. Then write down three promises that hold you.

Day 30 – The Knife Is Love

Read the entire Gospel of John chapter 15 one more time. Then read Romans 8:28–39.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Not the knife. Not the fire. Not the pruning. Not the pain. His love is not soft. It is strong. It cuts. It saves. Write your own prayer of surrender. End with these words: "The knife is love. I will not flinch."

Appendix B: For Pastors and Small Group Leaders

How to Preach This Without Getting Fired (Mostly Serious, Slightly Ironic)

I wrote this book because I have watched too many pastors soften John 15. I have heard too many sermons on "abiding" that conveniently skipped verse 6. I have seen too many Bible studies celebrate the promise of asking whatever you wish while ignoring the prerequisite.

So if you are a pastor or a small group leader, I want to say something directly to you.

Preach the whole text.

Not the parts that make people nod. Not the parts that fill the offering plate. Not the parts that keep the denominational bosses happy.

The whole text. Verse 6 included. The fire included. The warning included. The uncomfortable, offensive, politically incorrect, culturally embarrassing truth that Jesus is the only way, that fruitfulness is required, and that fruitless branches burn.

You will lose people. Some will leave. Some will complain. Some will write letters. Some will stop giving. Some will try to get you fired.

That's fine. They were not looking for Jesus. They were looking for a version of Jesus that doesn't exist. And your job is not to keep them comfortable. Your job is to preach the Word. *"In season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."* (2 Timothy 4:2)

Yes, with patience. Yes, with love. Yes, with tears. But also with reproof and rebuke. Because the Word cuts. And if you are preaching the Word, your sermons will cut.

Do not use this book to beat people.

The knife is love. Pruning is grace. The goal is fruit, not wounds. So preach the hard truths, but preach them with the heart of the Vinedresser. He cuts because He loves. You must do the same.

Never preach judgment without hope. Never preach the fire without the Vine. Never preach the knife without the fruit.

People need to be warned. But they also need to be welcomed. The same Jesus who said, *"The branches are thrown into the fire,"* also said, *"Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."* (Matthew 11:28)

Hold both. Warn and welcome. Cut and comfort. Prune and promise.

Preach this to yourself first.

Before you preach a single sermon on pruning, let the Vinedresser prune you.
Before you lead a small group through John 15, let the knife cut your own idols.
Before you warn others about the fire, make sure you are abiding.

The biggest danger for leaders is not that their people will reject the hard truths. It is that the leaders themselves will become fruitless branches. Preaching without abiding. Teaching without obeying. Leading without following.

Don't let that be you.

Submit to the knife. Then lead others to do the same.

Practical tips for not getting fired (but maybe getting fired anyway):

1. Preach the hard truths gradually. Not because you're hiding them. Because people need time to digest. You can preach verse 6 in week three of a series on John 15, not necessarily the first sermon. But preach it.
2. Always circle back to the gospel. The fire is real. But the Vine is real too. The warning is severe. But the invitation is open. Don't leave people in despair. Leave them at the cross.
3. Love the people you're preaching to. If you preach hard truths without love, you are just clanging cymbal. But if you love them, they will know that the knife is not cruelty. It is care.
4. Be prepared for pushback. Some people will be angry. Some will be confused. Some will be wounded (rightly or wrongly). Listen to them. Don't be defensive. But don't back down from the text.
5. If you get fired for preaching John 15, you are in good company. The prophets were rejected. The apostles were martyred. Jesus was crucified. The world does not welcome the knife. But the Vinedresser sees.

Appendix C: A Letter to the One Who Feels Cut

One page. Pastoral. Brutally kind.

Dear you.

I don't know your name. But I know you feel cut.

You have been pruned. And it hurts. More than you thought anything could hurt.
More than you thought you could bear.

Maybe you lost something. A relationship. A job. A dream. A reputation. A sense of purpose. Maybe you lost everything.

Or maybe you didn't lose anything tangible. Maybe you just feel the knife. The slow, relentless cutting of the Vinedresser. The removal of things you didn't even know were idols until they were gone.

You are bleeding. And you are confused. And you are wondering if God is punishing you. Or if He has forgotten you. Or if He never loved you at all.

I want to tell you something.

The Vinedresser does not cut dead branches.

He doesn't waste His time. He doesn't prune what He doesn't intend to keep. He doesn't cut what He plans to burn.

If you were fruitless—if you were disconnected from the Vine—He would not be pruning you. He would be leaving you alone. He would be gathering you for the fire.

But He is not leaving you alone. He is cutting you. He is pruning you. He is removing things that are in the way of your fruitfulness.

That is not punishment. That is love. That is investment. That is the painful, surgical, relentless love of a Father who sees what you can become and refuses to let you stay where you are.

The cut means you are alive.

The pain means you are connected.

The knife means you belong to Him.

I know it hurts. I know you want to pull away. I know you are tempted to believe the lie that God is angry, that He has abandoned you, that the pruning is proof of your failure.

Don't believe it.

The Vinedresser is good. He knows what He is doing. He has never made a mistake. He has never cut too deep. He has never pruned a branch He did not intend to keep.

He loves you. That is why He cuts you.

So here is what I want you to do.

Stop flinching. Stop fighting the knife. Stop protecting the things He is trying to remove. Stop running from the Vinedresser.

Trust Him. He is not your enemy. He is your Father. He is your Vinedresser. He is your Healer. He is your Hope.

Stay. Stay connected to the Vine. Stay in the Word. Stay in prayer. Stay in the church. Stay in the fight. Stay.

The fruit is coming. Not maybe. Not possibly. Not if you get your act together.

The fruit is coming because the Vinedresser is faithful. He does not start a work and abandon it. He does not prune a branch and leave it to wither.

He finishes what He starts.

The knife is almost done. The harvest is almost here.

Don't give up.

You are being pruned. Not punished. Prepared. Not punished. Loved. Not punished.

The knife is love.

Stop flinching.

With you in the cutting,

The Author