

# The Blessing of Affliction

By Mary Kane

It is springtime again in the Midwest. The bluebirds have returned from the south and the juncos have headed north for the summer. Overnight, the landscape seems to have changed from the dull grays and browns of the between seasons to the vibrant greens and soft pastels of spring!



In order to bring about this colorful change, environmental conditions must be just right! Please make a quick mental list of the growing conditions required by plants and trees to bud.

Rain, sunshine, and nutrient rich soil were probably on your list of requirements for growing healthy plants. Like plants, Christians also require specific conditions for healthy spiritual growth.

**In the space provided below, please list the conditions that must exist to ensure vibrant spiritual growth:**

You most likely listed conditions such as: attending a weekend retreat, reading an inspirational book, listening to sermons at church, studying the Bible, praying and scripture memorization. All of these things will help produce the fruit of the spirit. Did you include *affliction* on your spiritual growth list? Most likely, no one else did either! While we may view *affliction* as a condition to be avoided at all costs, God's Word clearly teaches otherwise. In fact, you may be surprised to learn in our study today, that while affliction is painful, it produces a harvest of fruitfulness!

**Please take a moment to quiet your heart before the Lord and ask Him to fill you with His Holy Spirit. Pray that God will give you deep insight into His Holy Word.**

Now our hearts and minds are ready to study God's Word.

**Please list a few people from the Bible who were afflicted with hardship and suffering.**

You probably listed Jesus, Paul and Job. Apart from Job, if anyone knew about suffering and affliction, it was Joseph. Sold as a slave by his brothers, wrongly accused for a crime he never committed, and thrown into prison for years, Joseph knew all about suffering and affliction. Despite all the harsh things that happened to Joseph, he did not become bitter, or blame God for his misery. Through his season of affliction, Joseph decided to trust God.

**What words come to mind when you think of the results or effects of *affliction*?**

The word *affliction* usually brings to mind negative descriptors such as: pain, suffering, burdens, trouble, misery, and oppression. As mentioned earlier, God however, sees *affliction* in a different light. Let's examine God's perspective concerning affliction by looking at a few Scripture passages from the Old and New Testaments.

Please read Genesis 41:50-52.

**What was the name of Joseph's first son?**

**What was the name of Joseph's second son?**

**Why did Joseph name his son *Ephraim*?**

Because God made him “fruitful in the land of his affliction.” Let’s take a deep look at the Hebrew meaning behind the word *Ephraim*. In the original language *Ephraim* has a very interesting definition, it means “double ash heap: I shall be doubly fruitful.” It also means “ash heap: place of fruitfulness.” Imagine for a moment what an ash heap might look like. I’m old enough to remember the *ashcan* we used to have in our back yard. When I was a little girl, back in those days, the garbage man did haul away our trash; we took our trash to the dump or we burned our trash in the ashcan. Sometimes after my father finished burning the trash, I looked in the ashcan to see what was left. The bottom of the barrel was always covered in gray-black ashes with an occasional unrecognizable lump amid the carnage. The smell of the ash can was very distinctive and unpleasant! Lifeless and ugly, there was nothing hopeful or fruitful about the ashes. But, glance back at the definition of *Ephraim*. From the definition, we learned that *ash heap* contains an element of hope—fruitfulness!

When we follow *Ephraim* back to its root word *parah*, it means “to bear fruit, to be fruitful, to branch off...” Does this definition bring to mind thoughts of hopelessness and destruction?

I live in Michigan, which is part of the “Fruit Belt.” From late spring through fall, we are blessed with rich harvests of delicious fruit; strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, mulberries, peaches, apples, plums, pears, grapes, and cherries. As most people already know, fruit does not grow overnight. It may take several years for a seedling to mature and be able to produce fruit. After mature trees bud and flower in the spring, it then takes several months until the fruit is ready to harvest. Also, fruit trees and bushes require both the beautiful warm sunny days of summer and the dark snowy days of winter in order to produce their delicious crops. God develops the fruit in our lives in the same manner; over time, with comfortable and adverse conditions. If you are currently experiencing the harsh winter months of the spiritual growing season, don’t give up! Hang on and wait for the blessing of the harvest.

To recap, from our study of the name *Ephraim*, we learn that there is a God ordained relationship between these two very different concepts—affliction and fruitfulness.

Affliction and fruitfulness...finally James 1:2 (My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials...) makes sense. The reason we can rejoice when we face trials and hardships is because God is using the suffering to bring us great fruitfulness. When we go through various trials, our faith is tested that it may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus. Affliction has the potential to cause our faith to grow exponentially, if we choose to continue to trust God through the hardship for the harvest!! What if Joseph had given up and turned his back on God because of his suffering? Not only would Joseph have lost out on the great blessing of a deep relationship with God, but most of the known world at that time would have starved to death.

Does suffering really equal blessing and fruitfulness? Is this concept of affliction/fruitfulness an isolated incident in Scripture that has been taken out of context? I believe not. Let's look at several other Scriptures that will prove that affliction produces in fruitfulness.

Please read Exodus 1:6-12.

**What did the Egyptian taskmasters do to the Hebrew people according to verse 11?**

**What happened as a result of their affliction?**

Here we see two different words for growth: *multiplied* and *grew*. *Multiplied* means "become much, many, numerous"; *grew* means "to break down, to break through." Contrary to the hopes of the Egyptians, as a result of their affliction, the Hebrew people grew in number while in Egypt.

How does this information apply to New Testament Christians? We also “grow and multiply” as we walk with Jesus. When Satan notices that we are *growing* in our relationship with the Lord, he sets out to afflict us. He may even set taskmasters over us to continually persecute and discourage us. But God, in His infinite wisdom and goodness, has decreed that the final outcome of our affliction will be greater character, hope and depth of relationship with Him. What Satan means for evil, God uses for good. As the definition indicates, *affliction* may even cause us to have a breakthrough in an issue that we have been dealing with for years.

**Can you recall any benefit that resulted from a season of affliction?**

**In what area of life do you need a breakthrough?**

Now, please turn to Job and read 1:6-22.

**What did Job lose as a result of the affliction that God allowed to come to him?**

**What was his reaction to these many devastating losses (20-22)?**

Did you notice that Job mourned and fell to the ground and worshiped God? But Satan was not finished with Job yet. Next, Satan assured God that Job would surely curse Him if he were allowed to afflict Job's health. After receiving permission to touch Job's health, Satan covered Job from head to toe with boils.

**Where do we find Job in verse 8?**

In the midst of the *ashes*. We know from our earlier word study on *Ephraim*, if there are ashes involved there is the possibility of great fruitfulness... if Job will only hang on for the harvest.

Please skip ahead and read Job 42:10.

**What was the result of Job's affliction?**

A double fruitfulness!

Now please turn to the New Testament and read Acts 8:1-8.

**Please fill in the missing word from verse 1:**

**"At that time great \_\_\_\_\_ arose against the church..."**

**What happened as a result of that persecution (verse 4)?**

The people were scattered and the Word was preached everywhere!

**What was the result of the Word being preached everywhere (verse 6)?**

Multitudes of people believed! They also witnessed many miracles by Phillip. Please list the types of miracles below:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Because of the persecution of the church, believers were scattered throughout Asia, the church grew exponentially, many experienced miraculous healing, the Gospel was taken to Samaritans (enemies of the Jews) and there was great joy! From affliction to abundant fruit!

Can you think of one verse in the Bible that equates ease and effortlessness with fruitfulness? To the contrary, the word *ease* is often used in association with those in whom the Lord is displeased:

**Psalm 73:12** "Behold, the ungodly, who are always at ease..."

**Psalm 123:4** "Our soul is exceedingly filled with scorn at those whom are continually at ease."

**Isaiah 32:11** "Tremble you who are at ease; Be troubled you complacent ones."

**Have you benefitted spiritually during a season of ease in your life?**

## **When have you experienced the greatest fruitfulness in your life?**

In closing, we need to reframe how we think of *affliction*. Before researching for this study, I used to think of *affliction* as a tool of the Devil, used to systematically destroy people, blow by blow. Lies! God's Word promises that He will use all things for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. Don't allow Satan to deceive you for another day about the results of affliction. You have blessings waiting for you! Don't give up! Someone needs to hear this today, keep walking with Jesus! A harvest of fruitfulness is coming!

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