

5. Jesus, the True Vine

John 15

Jesus' Final Days on Earth

We continue the teaching of Jesus from our previous study, “The Promise of the Holy Spirit.” After Jesus spoke to the disciples about the coming of the Holy Spirit, He got up and began to leave (John 14:31). Like any Rabbi, the Lord continued to talk as they walked. The Garden of Gethsemane was just to the East of the Temple area itself, so it is likely that, as they walked, they could see the enormous golden grapevine that hung across the four columns at the entrance to the Temple. Each of the clusters of grapes was the size of a man.¹ The *Mishnah*, a book embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law, says that people made freewill offerings to God by purchasing a golden leaf, berry, or cluster, which the priests would then attach to the vine. Jewish people who gave generously to the Temple had their names inscribed on the golden leaves. It is possible that, as they looked at the golden vine of the Temple, Jesus continued to share further about the spiritual fruit that God would bring from the lives of disciples:

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:1-8).

I Am the True Vine

We come now to John the Apostle's recording of the seventh and final “I Am” statement of Jesus, “I am the true vine” (v. 1). When the Lord brought His people out of Egypt, Moses was given a message for the children of Israel. When the Israelites asked Moses who had sent him, he was to reply with the answer God gave him: “**I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you’**” (Exodus 3:14). The English expression “I Am” is the translation of the Hebrew word *YHVH*, vocalized as “Yahveh” and translated into English as LORD. It was the personal name by which God revealed Himself and occurred over 6,000 times in the Old Testament. The meaning of *YHVH* is not completely clear to biblical scholars, but most scholars believe that the name means, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” The Lord was saying to His disciples and us that He would be everything to us that we need Him to be. The six other “I Am” statements are, “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35), “I am the Light of the World” (John 8:12), “I am the Gate” (John 10:9), “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11), “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25), “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6). This vocalizing of the ‘I Am’ statements by Jesus angered the Pharisees so much that they began picking up stones to throw at Him for blasphemy (John 8:58-59). They correctly understood that Jesus was saying He is the same *YHVH* that delivered the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. In this

¹ Josephus. *Antiquities* 15. 395.

passage, Jesus is using the same name in Greek and saying He is the True Vine. What did He mean?

The idea of a vine or vineyard was a well-known symbol in the Scriptures of the nation of Israel. We see it used as a common theme, often as an analogy:

¹I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. ²He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but **it yielded only bad fruit**. ³Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. ⁴What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? ⁵Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. ⁶I will make it a wasteland, neither pruned nor cultivated, and briers and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. ⁷The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. And **he looked for justice**, but saw bloodshed; **for righteousness**, but heard cries of distress (Isaiah 5:1-7 Emphasis mine).

When inspecting His vineyard, the people of Israel and Judah, what fruit was God looking for? What kind of fruit does He want to produce from our lives?

Through this prophetic word by Isaiah, the Lord was saying that God is the Gardener and that He had planted His covenant people into the land to bear a solid testimony to His Name. After all His work in supplying them with complete provision for fruitfulness, He looked for a crop of good grapes exhibiting justice and righteousness (Isaiah 5:7), but it yielded only bad fruit (Isaiah 5:2).

Jesus was using a visual picture as He often did when teaching. There are two thoughts about which He could have been talking. The first is that He was contrasting Himself with the nation of Israel that failed in its fruit-bearing and that He had come to help His people bear good fruit. Secondly, He could have been saying He is the real Vine stock that will bring spiritual fruit, contrasting Himself with the artificial vine hanging on the Temple. If the disciples offered themselves to Him, the True Vine, to the degree that people offered their substance to this golden symbol, the result would be abundant spiritual fruit.

Jesus came to establish the prophesied New Covenant: “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31). He is the source of eternal life and fruit-bearing to all who come to Him and become one with Him as branches are connected to a life source, such as the trunk of the vine. He is the True Vine. The time was coming and has now come for both Jews and Gentiles to be grafted into the True Vine. Jesus wanted to show them what true covenant life was and the kind of fruit it would produce. Just as He was “One with the Father” (John 14:20), He knew that the only way the people of God could produce fruit was to have His life in us, flowing through us. The church is not an organization but an organism; we must be organically connected to the life source: “Christ in us, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

The Father is the Gardener

Working in a vineyard during the growing season would be hard work. Unlike other fruit and vegetable plants, there was much to do if you wanted to see clusters of grapes at harvest time. Jesus said that the Father was at work in cutting off some branches and yet pruning others (John 15:2). The Greek verb *airō* is translated as “cuts off” by the New International Version, but in the King James Version it is translated as “takes away.” Some people wonder if they can lose their salvation if they are not good enough. Jesus said that the branches to which the Father gives attention are both “in Him.” **“He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit” (John 15:2).** It is possible that the taking away is a reference to Judas, but Judas never was in Christ. He never became a believer: **“Yet there are some of you who do not believe” (John 6:64).** The Scriptures say that he was a devil (John 6:70). The analogy the Lord is giving us is that the branches the Father is training are believers spiritually connected to Christ. The Greek word *airō* primarily means “to lift from the ground.” Author Charles Swindoll in his commentary, *Swindoll’s New Testament Insights on John*, says:

The Greek verb *airō*, translated by the KJV as “takes away,” has the primary definition of “to lift from the ground,” although the term can and often does mean “to lift with a view to carrying, to carry off or put away.” John uses *airō* in both senses: “to take away” (John 11:39; 11:48; 16:22; 17:15;) and “to lift up” (5:8-12; 8:59). Therefore, a strong case for either definition can be made. I favor the definition “to lift up” for a couple of reasons. First, these two verses introduce the illustration in summary fashion, describing the general care of a vinedresser nurturing a vine. Vinedressers are rarely seen cutting off branches during the growing season. Instead, they carry a bundle of strings and a pair of pruning shears as they work their way down a row. They carefully lift sagging branches and tie them to the trellis—a procedure called “training.” They also strategically snip smaller shoots from branches to maximize their yield of fruit, which is called pruning. Second, a combination of “takes away” and “prunes” places too great an emphasis on cutting the vine when Jesus appears to be highlighting the Father’s care during the growing season. The image of carrying off dead branches is a detail that will appear later as He refines His illustration.²

Clusters of grapes lying on the ground can be food for all kinds of insects, and of course, when it rains, the mud will also spoil the fruit. If we agree with Charles Swindoll, this seems to speak of the Father’s care and training of us while we are growing in Christ. These thoughts follow naturally after Jesus told the disciples of the Helper, the Holy Spirit. He is the One who will continue training and lifting the grapes’ clusters to maximum fruitfulness. The primary emphasis of this teaching is to illustrate the pruning and the careful cultivation and tending of His people, His Vineyard.

Thinking about this analogy, can you share a time when God had to pick you up off the ground and restore you to Himself so you could grow?

If you are a believer in Christ, you will be fruitful. How much fruit comes from your life is up to the choices and decisions you make throughout your life. There are levels of fruitfulness according

² Charles R. Swindoll. *Swindoll’s New Testament Insights, Insights on John*. Published by Zondervan, page 257.

to the sacrificial ways that people live for Christ. Jesus talked about how fruitful the good seed would be in the Parable of the Sower:

Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--**a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown** (Matthew 13:8).

Some are so devoted to the Lord to the degree that they bring forth a crop that is a hundred times what is sown. However, be aware that if you pray to be fruitful, you will be pruned! If you have prayed that God will use you to work in His fields with Him, He will require a more significant commitment and a greater consecration to the work in His field. The great evangelist, D.L. Moody, was at a meeting where the preacher spoke the following words: “The world has yet to see what God will do with and for and through and in and by the man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him.” The words impacted Moody. “He said ‘a man,’” thought Moody; “he did not say a great man, nor a learned man, nor a rich man, nor a wise man, nor an eloquent man, nor a ‘smart’ man, but simply ‘a man.’ I am a man, and it lies with the man himself whether he will or will not make that entire and full consecration. I will try my utmost to be that man.”³

D.L. Moody desired to make a big difference with his life as he gave himself to God in utter consecration and dedication to winning the lost for Christ. We should not speak our words of devotion to Christ lightly because there is a cost to such commitment. Moody did experience hardship in his life when his church building burned down in the great Chicago fire of 1871, but it launched him into an evangelistic ministry to many countries. When we commit to discipleship, difficulties will come our way, but great fruit will be the reward if we consecrate ourselves to saving lives for Christ's sake. These thoughts are also spoken of in the Gospel of Mark:

²⁸Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!” ²⁹“Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰will fail **to receive a hundred times as much** in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields—**along with persecutions**—and in the age to come eternal life (Mark 10:28-30. Emphasis mine).

As we follow Christ, there will be a reward for our consecration; however, be aware that it will mean going through persecutions, as foretold by Jesus in the above passage. Just as He promises that, in following Him, we will receive a hundred times as much in this life, He also promises that there will be persecution. We can take comfort in the fact that it will be the Father at work in us, bringing pruning to our lives to harvest more fruit when we enter eternal life. When difficulties come, it is good to think about the blessings God gives us, especially our friends and the family to which we belong in the Body of Christ. The Lord allows us to go through difficulties because only such things bring forth the necessary changes to bear the fruit God seeks.

God Prunes Our Lives to Bring More Fruit

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and

³ *The Life of D.L. Moody*. From the Official Authorized Edition. By his son, William R. Moody. <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Life%20of%20Moody.pdf>.

remain in his love. ¹¹I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷This is my command: Love each other (John 15:9-17).

If you believe in Christ, there will be fruit in your life. No root, no fruit! If you, at the deepest level of your being, are rooted and grounded in love with the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:17), there cannot fail to be fruit from your life. Why? Because the life-giving sap of the Vine, the Lord Jesus Christ, flows into your spiritual being, and the eternal Father, the Gardener, is at work in you and through you to produce fruit from your union with Christ.

God wants to bring forth two kinds of fruit from your life. First, there is the fruit of the Spirit:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).

This kind of fruit is what Isaiah the prophet said that God was seeking in His vineyard, the nation of Israel, i.e., the justice and righteousness that springs from the lives of Christ's followers. God brings these inner qualities from our lives as we cooperate with His Spirit. We often cannot see Him at work in our circumstances; it is only later, when we look back upon our lives, that we see that God was at work in us to bring forth enduring qualities of humility, righteousness, love, joy, peace, etc. Then, we realize it was God's pruning knife at work. Gratefulness will be your experience in eternity for the work of the Gardener with His pruning knife.

Secondly, there is the fruit of other lives that we influence for Christ—lives that, because of your work and words and the fruit of the Spirit in your life, are forever changed by your relationship with them. Paul the Apostle wrote about his work among the Roman church in this way:

I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that **I might have a harvest among you**, just as I have had among the other Gentiles (Romans 1:13).

The way the Father works with His pruning knife can seem harsh to us, especially when we are those under His knife. I have found that God will meet our consecration with His faithfulness. If you are willing to bear fruit, you will partake of the life-giving sap that comes from being a part of the True Vine. The Lord will transform us from the inside out as we obey Him. When we go through trials and tests, we will experience the closeness to the Father that helps us overcome and gives us joy as we walk with Him. The Gardener will change us through various situational tests through which He puts us:

When American Airlines trains its pilots, the company first seeks to prove them by using

a simulator. The simulator is designed to present the pilots with a variety of potential problems so that they can handle any emergency that they may experience in the future. First, the pilots are tested with simple challenges, which eventually build up to catastrophic situations. Then, they are given more complex problems only after they have mastered the previous ones. The result is that when the pilots have completed their courses, they are prepared to handle any issues that come their way. This is similar to God's method of working with us. God teaches us how to manage life's problems, but He never gives us more than we can handle. He teaches us through each situation so that we can be fully prepared and mature people, ready to handle the challenges that come our way.⁴

Remaining in Christ

What does the Lord mean when He repeatedly says in John 15:4-7 about remaining in the Vine? How do we remain in Him?

If you remain in me and **my words remain in you**, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (John 15:7).

If you keep my commands, you will **remain** in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and **remain** in his love (John 15:10).

As we develop intimacy with the Lord and learn to listen and obey His Word, the life-sap of the Lord Jesus, the Vine, will flow through us to bear fruit. Developing intimacy must be intentional, just as it is with any relationship. You would not expect to be close to someone by just knowing facts about that person. Intimacy with another develops as you are sincere and transparent and actively listen to others as they, in turn, can similarly share their hearts with you. Be intentional about spending time with Christ and with those in His Body. Even when people clamored for Him, Jesus took time to be with His Father.

The Lord now bared His heart with His disciples to prepare them for the persecution ahead. Even in Christ's darkest hour, i.e., His own dark night of the soul, His concern for those He loved overshadowed His thoughts concerning Himself. It tells us much about the Shepherd's care and love for His sheep.

The World Hates Disciples of Christ

¹⁸If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰Remember what I told you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. ²²If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³Whoever hates me hates my Father as well. ²⁴If I had not done among them the works no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. As it is, they have seen, and yet they have

⁴ Edited by Michael P. Green. *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*. Published by Baker Book House, page 375.

hated both me and my Father. ²⁵But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: “They hated me without reason” (John 15:18-25).

Jesus tells the disciples that the world will hate them (v. 18). What is He referring to when He talks about the world? Why would the world hate the disciples?

Those of you who are in Christ Jesus are in a battle. Humanity is in an unseen cosmic warfare between good and evil, God and Satan. Evil spirits influence what goes on in the world of flesh and blood individuals. Satan, the adversary, and enemy of all true Christian believers is trying to keep control of this world system he has set up against God. The Bible tells us that Satan is the god, prince, or ruler of this world:

Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out (John 12:31). I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me (John 14:30).

There is a difference between the physical planet, which God has created, and the world that we are told not to love:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them (1 John 2:15).

The natural world has no mind, so it cannot be evil and hate the disciples. The world that Jesus is talking about is the world system with its values and opposition to the Lord and His disciples. John goes further in his letter to elaborate on the values of "the world."

¹⁶For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever (1 John 2:16-17).

The world is comprised of society organizing itself apart from and without God. The Lord Jesus commissions all disciples of Christ to reach into this fallen world system and rescue precious people for whom Christ has died to redeem. Therefore, with its unseen evil forces, this world system will always oppose the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We, His witnesses, are to shine as light shines in the darkness. The world's institutions, including our educational systems, music, politics, workplaces, and yes, in some cases, even religion, oppose God. Paul the Apostle wrote to his protégé warning him of the same thing: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

The world system will always be opposed to people who have different values, goals, and aspirations to the way this world is set up. If you “go against the flow,” then you will experience conflict. What we are talking about here is more than just a resistance to a different way of thinking. The resistance we are discussing here has a spiritual nature. When believers in Christ go against the flow of this world system toward evil, they will encounter forces opposed to our Lord Jesus. Believers will be in opposition against unseen forces, principalities, and powers.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

If you start to do things differently from the way of this world, do not be surprised if you are viewed with a watchful eye or criticized even by friends and family. If you are more overt about your faith, antagonism, and persecution will surely come. Jesus warned His disciples that this would be the norm and that we should expect it. He said these words for those listening to Him and us living now in the twenty-first century.

Because we can expect persecution, I am not saying that we, as Christians, should shun or hide from the world. People from all walks of life and all social classes need to hear the good news of what Jesus has done, and we need to walk out the values and truth of God in whatever business, learning institution, or situation we exist. All Christians should follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and not be a slave to fear what the world will say or do but seek to shine the light of Christ in whatever field of life God has put them. However, if we become entangled with the world and pursue its values, how will we stand out as being different? How will we attract others to the light of Christ if our light is dimmed through the entrapments of this world? People are looking for real life, and where it is evident, a harvest will result in people being drawn to Christ.

What major entrapments do you see in our present society that are hard to avoid? What does it mean to be “in the world but not of the world?” (John 17:15-16).

Why Do Believers Go Through Persecution?

A deeper trust in God comes to us when we face persecution for our faith. As far as we know, Paul the Apostle suffered more for his faith than any other in the early days of the church, but he came to a place in his life where he understood that the power of Christ rested upon him significantly when he was at his weakest and most vulnerable:

⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

When we are weak in ourselves, God grants His power to rest on us and use our words powerfully. We don't know what God will do if we are obedient to sharing the Gospel with those around us. God can bring great fruit from our lives if we trust Him, even in persecution. Let's now continue with our text:

²⁰Remember what I told you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me (John 15:20-21).

We are not to hide away from this world but confront and bring a different spirit onto the battleground. When Jesus had opposition from individuals, He did not reply with a competitive critical spirit. His spiritual warfare was to respond to anger with a soft answer: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). True spiritual warfare does the opposite of what the enemy is seeking to do. People are never our enemies.

The Helper (Advocate) Will Be with Us

As the Lord Jesus looked at the eleven that night, He reminded them that the Spirit's coming would help them endure persecution and the opposition He knew would come.

²⁶When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me. ²⁷And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning (John 15:26-27).

The eleven disciples were to wait for the Holy Spirit to come; He would be their Helper, their *Paraclete*, the one called alongside to help them. The coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost would counteract the spiritual battle that would be waged against them by the spirit of the world.

Our God will not allow us to go through anything that He will not go through with us. He will sustain us and give us His grace for whatever is ahead for the saints. A story that comes to mind that Corrie Ten Boom told illustrates this. When World War II broke out, Corrie was a Dutch woman whose father owned a watch shop in Haarlem, Holland. This dedicated Christian family began providing "hiding places" for persecuted Jews. She lived through many trials and persecution when her family went to a concentration camp because of the help they provided to the Jews.

Corrie was afraid at one point and did not think she could handle what was ahead. Her father asked her, "Corrie, when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket?" She replied, "Why, just before we get on the train." "Exactly," he replied. "And our wise Father in heaven knows when we will need things. When the time comes that you need strength, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need, just in time. God will give you what you need when you need it." We are not to be fearful concerning the things we endure but to pray for our God to deliver us, and if He chooses to take us home, then all is well.

Prayer: Father, we do pray for all those suffering in the name of Christ in the days we live. Deliver them and us from evil. Our prayer, Father, is for grace to help them amid weakness. May Your power and glory rest upon Your people, in Jesus' name! Amen

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com