

Israel's Fruitlessness Illustrated

Ezekiel 15

Ezekiel 15: *"Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: ²'Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any other wood, the vine branch which is among the trees of the forest? ³Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on? ⁴Instead, it is thrown into the fire for fuel; the fire devours both ends of it, and its middle is burned. Is it useful for any work? ⁵Indeed, when it was whole, no object could be made from it. How much less will it be useful for any work when the fire has devoured it, and it is burned?*

⁶'Therefore thus says the Lord God: 'Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; ⁷and I will set My face against them. They will go out from one fire, but another fire shall devour them. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I set My face against them.⁸ Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have persisted in unfaithfulness,' says the Lord God."

Background Notes

In Ezekiel 14, the Lord directed Ezekiel to give two messages of judgment to the elders of the Jews in Babylon. These Jews were already captives in Babylon, even though Jerusalem and the Temple of the Lord had not yet been destroyed. The Jewish elders in Babylon were responsible to be the spiritual and moral leaders of the captives, but they themselves were practicing idolatry - not open idol worship, but idolatry of the heart.

As a result, the Lord said He would not answer or give guidance to these elders, or to anyone else who practiced secret idolatry. *"For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the Lord will answer him by Myself. ⁸I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people. Then you shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 14:7-8).*

What a lesson for us today! Do you have any hidden idols - idols of the heart? If you do, don't expect God to answer your prayers or give you guidance. Anything on your priority list that is higher than God is an "idol." God will not give guidance to those who are practicing idolatry of the heart. Is it possible that God is not answering your prayers for guidance because there is some hidden idolatry in your life?

Ezekiel's denunciation of the nation of Judah continues in chapter 15. In chapters 15-17 he gave three parables to portray the sad moral and spiritual condition of the nation.

Chapter 15 records the parable of the fruitless vine. Israel was like a vine planted in the land of Canaan. God intended them to bear spiritual fruit and to be a light to the nations. Psalm 80:8-11 says, “*You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it. ⁹ You prepared room for it, and caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land. ¹⁰ The hills were covered with its shadow, and the mighty cedars with its boughs. ¹¹ She sent out her boughs to the Sea, and her branches to the River.*”

But Israel did not continue to bear spiritual fruit. In fact, idolatry was already creeping into the nation by the end of King Solomon’s reign. God raised up the prophets to rebuke the people for their fruitless condition. Listen to the words of Hosea 10:1-2 - “*Israel empties his vine; he brings forth fruit for himself. ² Their heart is divided; now they are held guilty.*”

And remember Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7? “*Now let me sing to my Well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My Well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. ² He dug it up and cleared out its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. He built a tower in its midst, and also made a winepress in it, and He expected it to bring forth good grapes, but it brought forth wild grapes. ³ “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge, please, between Me and My vineyard. ⁴ What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?*”

⁵ And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned; and break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will lay it waste; it shall not be pruned or dug, but there shall come up briars and thorns. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain on it.” ⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.”

Jeremiah also denounced the fruitless condition of the nation. Jeremiah 2:21: “*Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before Me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?*”

With this prophetic background in view, Ezekiel gave the parable of the fruitless vine. Everyone who was listening knew exactly who “the fruitless vine” was.

Doctrinal Points

1. A fruitless vine is good for nothing.

Verses 2 -3: “*Son of man, how is the wood of the vine better than any other wood, the vine branch which is among the trees of the forest? ³ Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on?”*”

Did you ever go to the lumberyard and order some vine wood? Of course not! Grapevine wood is notoriously useless. You can’t make furniture out of vine wood and you can’t build a house out of vine wood. You can’t even make a peg for

the wall from vine wood. As soon as the wood dries, the peg will have no strength. Vine wood is good for nothing - and that's the point. A grapevine is good for only one thing: to bear fruit while it is living. Once the vine is dead, it's worthless. A fruitless vine is good for nothing.

Israel was God's vine, but they were not bearing fruit. They were good for nothing, so God would allow His people go into captivity. Many of the Jews thought that God would never let this happen. After all, they thought, we're God's people, and we have the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. But in essence God said, "The point is not that you're My people, and it's not that you have the Temple in Jerusalem. The point is: Are you bearing fruit?" God had asked His people to bear spiritual fruit - but if they didn't bear fruit, they would be removed, because they were good for nothing.

In John 15:5 the Lord Jesus said, *"I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me and I in him bears much fruit. For without Me, you can do nothing."* As Israel was to bear spiritual fruit, so we as Christians are to bear spiritual fruit. We should be productive in the service of the Lord, and the fruit of the Spirit should be seen in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

In John 15:2 the Lord said, *"Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that bears fruit He prunes that it may bear more fruit."* The phrase "takes away" does not mean loss of salvation, but rather it means "picked up" or "removed" - as in the setting aside or even the death of an unfaithful Christian. In any case, the point is that a believer's purpose of life is to bear spiritual fruit.

Let me ask you today: Is bearing fruit for the Lord your purpose in life? Or do you have a more selfish purpose for living? A fruitless vine is good for nothing.

2. A fruitless vine is given to the fire.

Verses 6-7: *"Therefore thus says the Lord God: 'Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; ⁷ and I will set My face against them. They will go out from one fire, but another fire shall devour them. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I set My face against them.'"*

What can you do with a fruitless vine? Nothing. You burn fruitless vines. In verses 4-5 the Lord said the nation had already been subjected to the fire and it was charred at both ends. Most likely this is a reference to the fact that Judah had been attacked from the south and from the north – Egypt from the south and Assyria and Babylon from the north. And now the middle of the vine, Jerusalem, was also charred - but the worst was yet to come. Nebuchadnezzar had attacked Jerusalem in 605 BC and in 597 BC, but the final attack and the burning of Jerusalem would take place in 586 BC. A fruitless vine is given to the fire.

In John 15:6 the Lord Jesus said, *“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered, and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”* This verse is not teaching that true believers can lose their salvation. It is either referring to “professing” Christians (unbelievers), who will suffer eternal loss in hell, or it’s referring to unfaithful Christians who are not abiding in Christ and not producing fruit. In the case of unfaithful Christians, it is their fruitless works that will be burned up.

Abiding in Christ means obeying Him and keeping His Word. Some unfaithful believers do not follow Christ and His Word – they live for themselves and their own selfish desires and pleasures.

It’s possible for Christians to waste their lives and bear no fruit. 1 Corinthians 3 teaches that believers can build on the foundation of Christ, and do good and fruitful works and receive reward - or they can do selfish fruitless works that will not count for reward at the judgment seat of Christ. If you’re a true Christian but not producing any fruit, you can’t lose your salvation, but all your fruitless works will be burned up. A fruitless vine is given to the fire.

Practical Application

Where’s the fruit?

Remember the popular ad that used that phrase “Where’s the beef?” The point of the ad was that a fast food hamburger might look good on the outside and it might be packaged up in an attractive way, but the beef patty was almost invisible! The bottom line with a burger is the content of beef. What good is a hamburger if there’s no beef?

Do you see the parallel with “Where’s the fruit?” Many Christians talk a good line and look like they’re living a pretty good life, but the bottom line is: Where’s the fruit? Fellow-believers, that question will be the bottom line question at the judgment seat of Christ – “Where’s the fruit?”

The Lord won’t want to hear how financially successful you were, nor how many degrees you have after your name, nor how popular or well-known you were. What He’ll want to know is – “Where’s the fruit?”

The Lord is the Vine and we are the branches. Now where’s the fruit?