

The Vine of God's Full Satisfaction

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Reading: John 15; Psalm 80:8,14; Isaiah 5:1,2; Jeremiah 2:21, 6:9; Ezekiel 15:1-6

The fifteenth step in the transition from the old Israel to the new is here in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel by John: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman."

You have the Old Testament background to that in the passages we have read: What Israel was intended to be, failed to be, and their destiny - "Cast into the fire". It is clear from these Scriptures that Israel was God's vine, but it became a false vine and God had to cast it into the fire, where it has been for nearly twenty centuries.

But when God cast that vine into the fire, He brought forth another. We have said that this Gospel by John sets forth the putting away of the old and the bringing in of the new. We have seen that various names of the old Israel have been taken over into the new Israel, and here in this chapter the vine is taken over. When Jesus said "I am the true vine", He emphasized that word 'TRUE'. If you could hear Him saying that phrase, it would be like this: "I am the TRUE vine". The implication is perfectly clear. 'I take the place of the false vine. That has been cast away and I am the true vine which takes its place.'

We have to spend a little while seeing how Israel was false to its very nature and purpose.

What is the nature of a vine? For one thing, it spreads out far and wide, on the right and on the left, always reaching out to cover more space. It is not the nature of the vine just to go straight up. It reaches out, expands itself.

Israel was raised up for this very purpose - to stretch out their arms and embrace the nations: "I... will give thee... for a light to the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6) is the word: "Nations shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising" (Isaiah 62:3). God raised up Israel to be a testimony in the nations, to bring the knowledge of God to the whole world. It was Israel's calling to fulfil a world purpose and a world vision. They were intended to be His missionary nation to the whole world, but instead of embracing the nations, they excluded them. They drew a wall round themselves and said 'We are THE people and all others are dogs.' They called the Gentiles 'dogs'. They shut themselves in to themselves and became an exclusive people, thus contradicting their own nature and mission. Exclusiveness was a contradiction to the very nature of Israel - and it is ALWAYS a contradiction to divine nature. It is not written in Scripture: 'God so loved the Jewish nation that He gave His only begotten Son.' It says: "God so loved the WORLD". The very love of God was contradicted by their exclusiveness. His very nature amongst them was violated in that way: and to turn in upon ourselves is always a violation of divine calling. It is a sin for any people to make themselves an end in themselves. That is why in the order of nature - when nature is normal - a family expands. The Lord laid down this law right at the beginning of human history, when He said to Noah and his sons after the flood: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Genesis 19:1). It was in the very nature of things by the appointment of God. As I say, when things are normal, no lives are an end in themselves. Of course, I know of those exceptions when it is not possible to expand, but I am speaking of the NORMAL course. In the very nature of things God intends life to be an expanding life. Anyone who violates that law deliberately will be an end in himself or herself and will sin against God's law.

Israel was called to expand and fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord, but they withheld that knowledge from the nations and turned in on themselves, made themselves an end in themselves. So God came down upon that and said: 'All right! You shall be an end in yourselves.' God's judgments are usually the confirmation of our own choices!

That was Israel's violation of their nature as a vine. Instead of expanding to the world, it contracted into itself and anything like that is always fatal.

'What about the purpose? Quite obviously the purpose of a vine is to bear fruit. It bears grapes, and from grapes there is to come the wine. In the Old Testament wine is always a symbol of life. That is why we have it at the Lord's Table. It represents His blood, and in that there is life. He Himself called it the fruit of the vine. He did not say: 'I will no more drink of My blood until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.' What He did say was: "I will no more drink of THE FRUIT OF THE VINE, until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14: 25). The grapes and the wine are symbols of life.

Israel of old was called to minister the life of God to all the nations. When you read these Gospels and look to

see what kind of fruit it is that Israel is bearing, you find that it is anything but life. It is really death. The fruit was sour. All those who were tasting the fruit of that Israel were turning away and saying: 'We do not want any more.' It was not life: it was death. The Gospels are just full of that truth.

Jesus said: "I am the true vine" ... "In him was life: and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Men's faces grew light when they tasted HIM.

Did you notice one thing about the vine that we read in the Old Testament? We read, in Ezekiel 15, that the vine has no other purpose in its existence than to bear fruit. Have you ever seen anything made of vine? You have never seen a table, or a vessel or even a walking-stick made of vine! Ezekiel says that you can do nothing with the wood of the vine - you cannot even make from it a peg on which to hang things. The vine is absolutely useless apart from the fruit. The grapes are the only purpose of its existence, and if it does not bear them, then, says Ezekiel, you just cast it into the fire. There are no by-products of the vine, no secondary use. It exists for one thing, and one thing only, and that is fruit.

God raised up the old Israel to bear His divine fruit of life and light for the nations, but they failed to do that. God had no other use for an Israel like that, so He said 'Cast it into the fire.' He did that nearly twenty centuries ago and that is where Israel is now.

We can see from that what the Lord Jesus means when He says that He is the true vine and we are the branches. The TRUE vine is that which fulfils the one and only purpose of its existence.

So Jesus brings this illustration over to Himself and His Church, and it is perfectly clear what is the nature of the Lord Jesus. He is reaching out to all men, embracing the whole world. He asks ALL the nations into His heart. ALL men are His concern and not any one nation. He said to His disciples: "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of ALL THE NATIONS" (Matthew 28:19). It is the very nature of Jesus to do that. It is quite foreign to Him to be exclusive, small and narrow and self-occupied.

Our salvation is to have our hearts enlarged so that they are bigger than ourselves. Anyone who turns in on himself or herself, and those who are always occupied with themselves, are dying while they live. It cannot be avoided. Let a little company of the Lord's people live just to itself, become wholly occupied with itself, and its days are numbered. They are living a living death. Their destiny is to fade out. That is true of any one Christian or of any company of the Lord's people, because Christ is in the believer and His very nature is to reach out like the vine. He would draw all men unto Himself, and for His people to be otherwise is a contradiction to His very nature, which is the nature of the true vine.

Jesus says: "I am the vine, ye are the branches". The branches of the vine make one vine - they partake of the same nature. Do you notice that it is the very branches themselves that do the expanding work of Jesus? Yes, this expanding work is manifested by the branches.

That, of course, is what happened in Jerusalem right at the beginning, when some troubles sprang up in the Christian church there. It was the first bit of trouble that the Christian church had! Some of the first Apostles wanted to stay in Jerusalem and build up the church there. Forgetting the commandment of the Lord, they were just settling down to make Jerusalem the center of everything and the church an exclusive body. Then there rose up in their midst a young man "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5), and his name was Stephen. If you listen to what Stephen said you will recognize that what he is saying has this meaning: 'This will not do. We have been called for the nations. We are not to be an exclusive people. We are called to a world mission and must not settle down in the old Judaism.' Some of the first Christians and Christian leaders did not agree with him. Of course, the old Israel did not agree with that! And so they stoned Stephen on this very issue of the world mission of the Church. I cannot help asking the question: Where were James and Peter when Stephen was being stoned? They were in Jerusalem, but were not present. Why was it that Stephen was stoned and not Peter or James? Because at that time they were not taking the line that Stephen was taking. They were making Jerusalem everything, and, of course, the old Israel would not stone them for doing that, so they were quite safe somewhere in Jerusalem. But Stephen was stoned.

Do understand that there is something here of which to take note: that this new Israel is given a mission to all the nations, and there is a great price to pay for that. The whole kingdom of Satan is against it. If you will just become a little, quiet, compromising local sect you will be all right. The devil won't worry you if you are just living within your own walls and closed doors, and the world will not trouble about you. It will leave you alone... but if you go out on this heavenly level of things and embrace all men in Christ, you will find that the world is against you and the devil is against you. You and I ought to see this in our day as no one has ever seen it

before. Do you not see what is happening in the nations? There is not a missionary left in China! It is no longer possible for one to go into that country; and that same thing is happening in other parts of the world. They have tried to drive them out of Africa. Why is this? Oh, the kingdom of Satan does not want Jesus to get into his world. There have been literally many thousands of martyrs for Jesus Christ in China, and many others in Africa, and in other parts. It has never been quite like this before. It is a new phase of things. Satan knows that his time is short and that he must do all he can to close the nations to Jesus Christ. So there is a great price bound up with this world mission. Stephen is the great example of that.

The purpose, then, of Christ and His Church, of the vine and the branches, is to bring life to men all over this world.

I wonder if that is altogether true of the church today! Do you not think that even the Christian Church is failing in this matter? It is not really bringing life to the nations. Many a place called a 'church' is not bringing life even to its own little locality. This is a contradiction of Christ!

But it is all very well to think of this objectively. It has to come down to every one of us. What is the proof that Christ is in you and in me? How can it be known that Christ is in us? Only in one way - that others are receiving life through us, that we minister the life of Christ to others, that when hungry and needy people come into touch with us they feel the touch of life. They may express it in different ways, but it amounts to this: 'That man, that woman, has something that I have not got and it is something that I need. There is something about them that I feel, and it is what I really need.' That should be true of every Christian because Christ is in us, expanding Himself through us and ministering His life through us.

Oh, do pray, dear friends, every day as you get up: 'Lord, make me a channel of life to someone today. Lord, minister Your own life through me to someone today. May I bring life wherever I am.' The Lord has no other purpose for you and for me. We may try to do a lot of things, but if we belong to the Vine we are no good for anything but to bear fruit; and that is to bring life to others. We are not even to be a peg upon which to hang something, or a walking-stick to help someone to stand up straight. No, God has no use for us other than to bear fruit, to bring life.

Jesus said here in this chapter: "Every branch that beareth fruit, he cleanseth it, that it may bear more fruit". Of course, we understand that in nature and agree with it. Perhaps if you have had anything to do with grape vines, you have done it yourself. It is strange that we believe in it as a law of nature and say: 'It is the right and the best thing to do to cut this piece off so that it will do better', but we do not agree with the Lord doing it to us. When He begins to do it we are full of grumbles and complaints! When for a little while He calls us to do less in order that He might fit us to do more, we do not agree. When it seems that the Lord is taking away some of our fruit, some of our work, we are full of problems. We do not understand the Lord and begin to ask questions about His love.

Jesus has laid this down as a positive truth. Here is some branch that is bearing fruit (not one that is bearing no fruit: that, He says, will be cast into the fire) and it is THAT one that He prunes. Here is a branch that is fulfilling its vocation and the Lord looks at it. He says: 'That is very good! I am very pleased with it, but I can do better, and there is better that that branch can do.' So He takes the knife, and He disciplines us, He reduces us in order to increase us. He cuts some away in order that there might be more.

What a lot of history there is in that statement! The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews said: "All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous, but grievous: yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11). That is only saying in another way that the Husbandman does sometimes take the knife and He cuts deeply into our souls, but afterward there is more and better fruit than there was before.

Now we come to this last word. The wine comes from the grape through the winepress, which is the symbol of pressure. What pressure is brought to bear upon that fruit in order to get the wine! The winepress is the symbol of breaking, and that fruit is broken to pieces. The wine is wrung out of its agony.

The Lord Jesus said "I am the true Vine", and it was prophesied of Him that He would tread the winepress alone. The Cross was His winepress. How He was pressed in the Cross! He was crushed and broken, but out of that breaking has come the life which you and I have, and which so many in all the nations have received. That is true, in a measure, of His Church. It was out of the breaking and crushing of the Church that the life came to the world. And that is true of every member, every branch of the vine. If we are to fulfil this true, living ministry, it will only be through suffering, through the winepress, through pressure and through breaking. Paul said: "We

were pressed out of measure, above strength" (II Corinthians 1:8 - A.V.) - but what life has come out of that man's pressure! It is like that. We are not talking about preaching and Bible teaching, but about this great ministry of Christ giving His life through us. It may be passed on to others through preaching, or through teaching, or through living, but if it is His life it will come out of experiences of suffering. A preacher or a teacher who has never suffered will never minister life.

Well, this may not seem a very pleasant outlook, but it is true. The best doctors and nurses are those who know something about suffering themselves. Some are just professional, treating you as a case - you are just case No. -. But, ah! there are others who treat you as a person, a human being, who care for you. If you ask why, you may find that they have a background of suffering themselves. They know just a little of what you are going through. We have read in the Letter to the Hebrews: "We have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are... he is able to succour them that are tempted" (Hebrews 4:15, 2:18). He has been the way of the winepress and we have received the benefit.

Is this why Paul said: "That I may know him... and the fellowship of his sufferings" (Philippians 3:9)? He knew quite well that the sufferings of Christ meant life, and if there was one thing which Paul wanted for others, it was that they should have this life, and have it through him. So he said: "That I may know... the fellowship of his sufferings".

That may not be our ambition, and we may not like the idea very much, but may the Lord help us to look at things in this way: 'The Lord is putting me in the winepress. He is putting me through a time of great pressure. I am being broken and crushed. Therefore the Lord intends to have more fruit, more life, and more people to have the life.' It is the very nature of this thing to reach out to others. That is the TRUE vine. Anything that is not like that is the false vine.

"I am the vine, ye are the branches."