Abiding In The Lord

Isaiah 5.1-7

John Chapter 15 has become throughout the history of the Church one of those hallmark passages for every believer in every season. The passage never loses it relevance and sweetness because the essence of the text surrounds the believer’s vital union with Jesus Christ, who, as Paul says, is our life (Col. 3.4). Being connected to Him is to be connected to the source that supplies us all of the riches and nutrients of the life of God in the soul of man. As Paul put it elsewhere, ‘every spiritual blessing’ is in Him (Eph. 1.4). however, many Christians today never come to realize the background of John 15. Jesus’ teaching on ‘abiding’ was not original, it was rooted in Yahweh’s song revealed to Isaiah concerning Israel. What has come to be a hallmark for Christian discipleship was originally part of God’s covenant lawsuit against His covenant people. This parabolic song is just the next metaphor in Isaiah used to teach Israel of the dire consequences of sin. Isaiah Chapter 5 can really be looked at as a series of lessons of spiritual discipleship and what it means to “walk in the light of the Lord” (2.5). From the new covenant perspective however, we would be remised if we do not also consider the Christological dimensions of Isaiah’s lessons here, for, in reality, they are the same separated only by time and circumstance but the truth of both texts is forever timeless!

*The Song-Image Of The Vineyard*

Launching us forward into this mysterious melody, the prophet has not just randomly switched his flow of thought so that Isaiah 5 is unattached to the preceding context. In fact, the language of “beloved” and the apparent tenderness of a song reaches back to the bridal chamber canopy of glory that the prophet just spoke of (cf. 4.5). As the beloved of the Lord, Israel was also supposed to be God’s vineyard. In a stroke of rhetorical genius, here, Isaiah links and transitions the metaphors from bridal chamber to fruitful land. This entire song can be labeled ‘what Israel was supposed to be’ i.e. God’s “fertile hill”, lit. ‘anointed son’ (בְּקֶ֥רֶן בֶּן־שָֽׁמֶן). In other places they are called the ‘planting of the Lord’ (cf. 5.2, 7; 61.3; also, Ex. 15.17; Num. 24.6; Ps. 80.8; Jer. 2.21; 11.17; 24.6; 32.41; 42.10; Ezek. 19.10). In fact, notice here Isaiah’s point that Judah in fact, was indeed just that, “a vineyard on a fertile hill.” Isaiah had already point this out:

**Isaiah 1:21** 21 How the faithful city has become a harlot, She who was full of justice! Righteousness once lodged in her, But now murderers.

In this song we learn that the parable before us pertains to the people of God, those who are in covenant bond with God. Of course, at the Old Covenant level, being in covenant with God does not automatically mean that one is in mystical union with God through Spirit-wrought regeneration. In a real sense, God here is addressing himself to two people. For those claiming to be God’s people, such a song becomes the occasion for judgment, but for those who are truly God’s people, the song becomes the gracious occasion for pruning, cleansing and future growth by faith. With two people there are two outcomes, two realities and two destinies. Even as a person claims union with Christ, when pruning is not the process of spiritual cultivation by the vinedresser, the Lord, the false branches are taken away:

**John 15:2** 2 “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit.

For the true believer, the true branches, the warning of removal becomes the occasion for future and fearful fruit-bearing in Christ the Vine. The burden of the rest of this song is to show God’s unfailing and undeniable faithfulness to a wayward people so that they are left without excuse for their sin making the retribution of His wrath logical and just. If they will not be moved by His goodness perhaps they will be motivated by His wrath. If Paul were alive during Isaiah’s ministry, he would say, ‘should we sin so that grace may abound, God forbid.’ But this is the state of the nation right now. This is why Isaiah can cry out, ‘Alas, sinful nation’ (1.4). They are not deterred from their sins and have come to abuse the grace of God.

*The Conditions Of The Vineyard*

We see this grace in the conditions of the vineyard. So, the metaphor now sets forth, the gracious operations of the Lord amidst His people. Such operations however have gone unappreciated as the people refuse to avail themselves of the ancient *means of grace*. Isaiah here portrays God as the loving and caring Owner of the vineyard who has been spent laboring as it were in the field with hoe and shovel in hand tilling the ground until the soil is turned over and all hinderances to growth have been removed. The imagery of the vineyard is not unique to Isaiah, other prophets engaged in the same prophetic imagery:

**Jeremiah 2:21** 21 “Yet I planted you a choice vine, A completely faithful seed. How then have you turned yourself before Me Into the degenerate shoots of a foreign vine?

Earlier in the prophecy, God speaking through Isaiah, gave the invitation for the people to enter into *redemptive* reason with Him as He graciously called out to them, “come let us reason together” (1.18). Here too, we come up for air, and in this moment of clarity, God addresses himself to the people, “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. 4 “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?” (vv.3-4). Several things need to be considered here. *First*, the conditions and the cultivation of the vineyard, the Jewish nation in covenant with God, have been set by an all-benevolent Owner, the Vinedresser-Lord, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (John 15.1). As E. J. Young has said, “the Owner of the vineyard is One who has naught but good-will for men” (Edward Young, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–18*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), 198). This is true so much so, that God says, “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it” (v.4). The doctrinal truth coming toward us here is that the God of our sanctification is motivated solely by what is good, holy and right. God is good and does good (Ps. 119.68 cf. Ps. 84.11; see also, Neh. 9). But they still rebelled against His “glorious presence” (cf. 3.8).

*Second*, this reminds us that what we need for our sanctification has been provided so that we are without excuse! The only question that really truly remains for us is whether or not, to use our common vernacular, ‘do we avail ourselves of the means of grace’ and take them seriously? The rotten fruit of the nation is simply stated in this passage, the rest of the Chapter will delve further into the details. There, the context will bear out that Judah had forgotten God, they had forgotten His Law (5.12), they neglected the knowledge of God (5.13), and in the passage of time, when they had become totally unfamiliar with the word of righteousness, the came to despise God (5.24).

Isaiah’s question here reminds us that what God has provided for His people is better than what we can do for ourselves. The means of grace, ordained by the infinite wisdom of God, will always be better than what we think we might need for our sanctification. So many go astray here, especially today. So often we are tempted to think we need something more than what God has given us in the gospel. For many, a new gospel has arrived, the ‘gospel of the new.’ We need a new way to live the Christian life. We a new kind of preaching, a new kind of preacher, a new kind of church, a new kind of program, a new approach to sexuality, a new means of grace because we think we can do for ourselves what God could not do. The result of this kind of restless deception is often compromise, lack of discipline and even apostasy. Jeremiah told the people of Israel, ‘ask for the old paths’ (Jer. 6.16, KJV). Don’t fall for the trends of modern evangelicals. New does not last. Instead “ask for the ancient paths” that is the path of rest and blessing (cf. Heb. 11). In Isaiah’s day, those ancient paths were fading from view, in Jeremiah’s day, they were gone and the people set in their wayward ways:

**Jeremiah 6:16** 16 Thus says the Lord, “Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it.’

*The Removal Of The Vineyard*

In the process of forsaking the ‘old paths,’ the sin of Judah has forced God’s hand so that even as the Lord cultivated the vineyard, now He himself will destroy it, He will “remove its hedge” and “break down its wall” so that it is “consumed” and “trampled” down. When God lays Judah “waste” the cultivation, the nurturing and maintenance of the vineyard will be no more. Instead of supplying all that the people need, there will only be deprivation, “I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it” (v.6b). Where as before, God had abundantly supplied the nation with water, as Isaiah has already said, “supply and support” (3.1) will be removed by the Lord. All the basic necessities of the nation, bread and water, will be removed so that they will not survive in the Land leading to their inevitable exile.

This is the Lo-Ammi that Hosea spoke about, the covenant language of divorce, the cutting away of the worthless branches. Israel as a nation has reached a point in time where they are quickly losing their national election. They will no longer be the chosen nation. These repeated apostasies, as serious as they were, are but precursors to the final lynchpin of their rebellion. That came when God sent to the nation the ultimate Prophet, Priest and King, His only Son. When they rejected Him, their judicial hardening was complete:

**Matthew 21:33–44** 33 “Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower, and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. 34 “When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. 35 “The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. 36 “Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. 37 “But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 “But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.’ 39 “They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. 40 “Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?” 41 They said to Him, “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the Scriptures, ‘The stone which the builders rejected, This became the chief corner stone; This came about from the Lord, And it is marvelous in our eyes’? 43 “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. 44 “And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.”

The NT presents a thorough explanation of Israel’s final apostasy, their covenant bond with God having been broken, at least along national lines. Israel as a nation is no longer in covenant with God (cf. 1 Th. 2.14-16)! So much theological error has resulted from the attempt to sustain a Jewish-centered approach to the Bible. But Scripture is clear that the Church under the new covenant represents the newly constituted people of God, John 15 is teaching just that. For it is now by virtue of one’s abiding in Jesus Christ that we are branches in God’s vineyard, for as Jesus said, “apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15.5). In the same way, Israel failed to abide. Therefore, no longer would the Lord be put a hedge of protection around them, no longer would He cultivate the ground, no longer would He prune or hoe the soil of their souls. The “briars and thorns” of sin have now chocked out the word and God’s gracious influences have been spurned for the last time. This dreadful development in the nation’s history is where we can learn the sobering lessons of our own sanctification. The author of Hebrews points us in that very direction:

**Hebrews 3:12–14** 12 Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. 14 For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end,

As we consider the song of Isaiah 5 and the metaphor of John 15, taken together, the Spirit is signifying in the book of Hebrews that the movement of progressive revelation is one of an *a fortiori* argument, a movement from the lesser to the greater. From the national and geo-physical plane, to the eternal and spiritual plane. From the theocratic covenant of the Mosaic order to the redemptive covenant of Jesus Christ. You can see this very hermeneutic in Hebrews 12, as just one example of the heaven-earth dualism of Hebrews:

**Hebrews 12:25** 25 See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

*The Interpretation Of The Vineyard*

As Isaiah departs from this metaphor, his explanation not only gives the meaning of the song, but he highlights the utter contradiction that God’s people have become, “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel And the men of Judah His delightful plant. Thus, He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress” (v.7). The only greater contradiction than this in the whole realm of creation, is the person who claims to know Him in a new covenant bond and does not do what He commands. Such blatant disobedience will be seen by a person’s fruit, the totality of their walk, for they will either persevere in bearing fruit or like Israel they will forsake and even come to despise the word of the Lord (Is. 5.24). Like Israel, Jesus also invites us to ‘come and reason.’ His invitation is for us to choose fullness of joy instead of briars and thorns:

**John 15:8–11** 8 “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. 9 “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. 11 “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

What song will the Lord sing over us? Will we be “His delightful plant”; bearing fruit in every season, or will we only bring forth “worthless” grapes. Worthless grapes are small, hard and bitter. A perfect, fitting description of what our lives can produce when we do not maximize the use of God’s means of grace. Our fruit small, our hearts hardened by sin, and our worship bitter not sweet. In the face of all of this, Jesus’ exhortation could not be more powerful and wise; abide, obey and rejoice! This is the ancient path of blessing.