

Isaiah 5:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

John 15:1-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

We were walking along a busy street, engrossed in our conversation  
and my friend was about to step out into traffic without looking,  
so I shouted and jerked him back onto the sidewalk.  
It was a **forceful warning** so that he wouldn't be run over.

The passage we just read from Isaiah  
was a **stark warning** that was told as an allegory,  
about the coming consequences if Israel did not return to God.

The Isaiah reading begins as a love-ballad in which the narrator  
describes God as a jilted and disappointed vineyard owner,  
whose vineyard was well planned and equipped to be fruitful,  
but then only produced wild grapes which are useless and bitter, vs. 1-2,

Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, **but it yielded wild grapes.**

Just as God had rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt,  
then blessed them and provided **the Promised Land** for them,

so too the vineyard owner provided generously

everything the vineyard needed to be fruitful.

But the vineyard failed to produce despite all the blessings,

so the owner withdrew his protection and allowed

the vineyard to be trampled and overgrown...

... just as God would eventually allow

the nation of Israel to be conquered and taken into exile.

The story begins with God's call and promise to Abraham,  
the blessing of receiving a home, **the Promised Land**.

Later on, when the descendants of Abraham became slaves in Egypt,  
the Lord God heard their cries of hopeless defeat and desperation,  
and through Moses and the mighty acts of God against Pharaoh,  
the Jewish people were freed from their Egyptian bondage.

The imagery from Isaiah continues in Psalm 80:8,

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.

**Though abundantly blessed by God, the nation was still not faithful.**

Prophet after prophet had warned against their idolatry,  
worship of other gods, judges corrupting justice for a bribe,  
gross immorality, widows and orphans robbed by the powerful,  
leaders who exploited and abused the poor and powerless.

At that point, the passage shifts to complaint and response, vs. 3~7.

And now, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it?

When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. **I will make it a waste...** For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!

Like the vineyard described in Isaiah, the Israelites though abundantly blessed by God **had failed to produce righteousness**.

The nation of Israel had rejected the blessings God intended,  
and refused to abide in the love and gracious ways of the Lord.

Building on the Old Testament images of vine and vineyard,

in the John passage, the obedience of Jesus stands in contrast

to Israel's refusal and failure to abide in the Lord, vs. 1-2, 4-6,

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. **He removes** every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit **he prunes** to make it bear more fruit.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,

neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, **thrown into the fire, and burned.**

As a young Christian, that was a terrible & terrifying passage to me.

The preaching and teaching I was hearing about that text  
was almost always an intense guilt-inducing challenge  
to work harder with more effort so to be more productive,  
a demand to be more fruitful or be cut-off, then wither and burn.

But actually, **that's not the message or point of this John passage.**

That misses the point and misses God's gracious gift of love,  
**for the point of grace is that we cannot do it for ourselves.**

If you've been a Christian for a while,  
then you already know about the frustration and guilt of regret,  
that so often the sins, failures and mistakes that trip us up,  
are a continuing problem despite our determination & effort,  
which leads to feeling trapped with a joyless sense of weary defeat,  
regret that we have failed to live out well our Christian life.

But notice, branches are not cut off and burned for fruitlessness.

A branch withers & burns because of its **refusal to trust and abide.**

vs. 6            *Whoever does not abide in me ...*

One time when a hurricane blasted through our area,  
and it did terrible damage to my poor little garden.

Afterward I had to gently clear away all the fallen debris

then tenderly trim, prune and tie up the injured plants,  
trying to heal and restore my garden from the storm damage.

The particular word in the Greek that is translated, "**he removes**",  
can also mean, "to lift and raise something up off the ground".

Grape vines in particular

cannot produce their fruit if they are lying on the ground,  
so vine dressers will gently lift up any fallen vines  
and carefully tie those branches onto the trellis,

which then enables them to produce & be fruitful.

The Greek word that is translated, "he prunes", (καθαρίζω)

also means, to cleanse and to heal, to nurture and to restore,

for obviously simply cutting of a damaged branch

isn't going to make **that branch** any more fruitful.

The idea of this pruning is lifting up to make it whole,

and to renew, repair or trim whatever is damaged or broken.

**That's what Jesus is describing in this passage,**

**trying to heal and restore us from the storms of life we endure.**

The John text is not about an angry or brutal vine-dresser,

who endlessly demands more work, more effort and productivity,

and who hacks off any damaged or broken limbs or fallen branches.

This passage isn't trying to threaten us or teach us to fear

that our God ever gives up on us in harsh and wrathful disgust,

nor is it intended to be a warning about God's judgment

against any damaged or nonproducing fallen branches.

Jesus is describing the nurture and care that enables fruitfulness,

and Jesus came, because we cannot do it for ourselves... vs. 5

I am the vine, you are the branches... apart from me you can do nothing.

**This is called the priority of grace ---**

e.g. first God loved and rescued the Israelites from slavery,

and only then God told them how to live in response,

instructing them to follow the 10 Commandments.

by

**The priority of grace** is an important theological truth, that

**first God loves us, and then calls us to live in faithful response.**

**That was the central message of the life and teaching of Jesus.**

Jesus came offering the mercy and compassion of a second chance,

in fact, we're allowed & offered as many second chances as we need.

The message that Jesus was teaching was not about condemnation

that the branches weren't trying hard enough or were being lazy.

In truth, **other than staying attached to the vine**

**what can a branch do to be more productive and fruitful?**

Jesus never said try harder to do more and we must act more religious.

**He said, abide, walk in faith and in gratitude with God... vs. 4, 9, 11,**

*Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

Our call is to focus on listening and connecting with God's grace,

and trust that fruitfulness will then most assuredly follow.

**Jesus calls us to abide, and it's up to God to produce the fruit.**

The Puritan writers often described God's grace and goodness

as an ever-flowing and over-flowing fountain of gracious love,

so we are like pipes or conduits through which God's grace

flows into us and then out through us to all the world...

**... and as long as that flow is unimpeded and can run freely,**

**our life in Christ will grow, we'll be faithful and fruitful.**

But we can easily be distracted & enticed by things of this world,

and be too busy pursuing wrong and unworthy goals and desires.

Like a clogged pipe we accumulate stuff in our lives that impedes

and that gradually cuts off the flow of God's grace and blessings.

**The question of being fruitful is not are we trying hard enough,**

**but are we abiding in Christ and clinging close to the true vine**

**so that grace can flow, and Christ can produce his fruit in us?**

This John passage is really about grace, hope and encouragement,

especially for people who are weary and tired of struggling,

or frustrated & discouraged, that for all they try and do,

they still feel like unworthy failures and frauds.

Abide means staying in a growing-deeper relationship with God,  
and we abide by creating space and time in our busy lives  
to wait for God to speak, for Spirit and grace to guide us.

**God has given us his love, and abide is the way we receive it.**

Abide is anywhere and everywhere that we receive and reflect  
God's gracious presence and steadfast loving kindness,  
and live in an authentic relationship as God intends,  
**and it's responding faithfully to blessings given by God.**

So in the present and practical, what does it mean for us to abide?

We can abide in all the many and varied, wonderful and mysterious  
experiences and events of Christian living and faithfulness,  
which is to focus on connecting and drawing nearer to the Lord.

Abide can be noticing with grateful delight the wonders of Creation,  
such as taking time to pause and appreciate a sunrise or sunset,  
for the Lord has given us an incredibly beautiful place to live.

Earlier this week, some of our church's musicians  
lead a wonderful and remarkable worship experience,  
which allowed our Presbytery leaders to abide in God's Presence.

I often abide by digging deeply into Scripture and meditative prayer,  
and it's best with a lot more listening than speaking,  
as I wait for God's answer in his way, in own his time.

Sometimes we abide with an open heart quietly listening  
sharing and being available, being present with compassion  
attentive to someone else's struggle, their hurt and grief.

Other times it's in the shared laughter, humor and joy  
of a good story, a joke or a funny delightful moment,  
as we find ourselves lifted into God's very presence.

Our God is often wonderfully present amid the mundane,  
as somehow God breaks in, and the Spirit blesses expectedly.

**Abide is really about our attitude and our affections,  
a perspective that offers every bit of my life to the Lord,  
and looks for God's work and grace amid life's ordinary.**

We can abide in all  
the many wonderful experiences and joys of Christian living,  
such as serving others, welcoming a stranger, hugging a child.

**To abide is an openness, awareness and appreciation of the Lord,**  
by which we draw nearer & deeper, seeking to please our God,  
who in that process, produces the fruit through our living.

As branches, we are the instruments of the vine for bearing the fruit  
and the fruitfulness comes from the branches staying connected.  
It's only by waiting & abiding on the vine that grows the fruit.

Jesus explained and promised: 1 John 3:1, John 10:10, 15:4,9

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are...  
Beloved, we are God's children now.*

*I came that you may have life, and have it more abundantly. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the  
branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. As the  
Father has loved me, so I have loved you; **abide in my love.***