

The Outcast Vine

(14) Ezekiel 15:1 – 16:14

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Ezek 15:1-5 – The useless wood of the grapevine.

Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: “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? Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on? Instead, 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? Indeed, 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?”

What is the wood of the vine?

In Scripture, God often used **the vine** as an illustration of Israel and later, the community of the Messiah.

- The vine represented the future blessings of the Messiah (Genesis 49:11)
- Vines fat with grapes were an early sign of the fertility and abundance of Canaan (Numbers 13:23)
- A bad vine could illustrate the wickedness of man (Deuteronomy 32:32)
- Jotham used a vine as a figure in a story (Judges 9:12-13)
- Israel was compared to a vine in Psalm 80:8-19
- Israel was like a vineyard (Isaiah 5:1-7)
- Israel was like a vine full of fruit (Hosea 10:1)
- Israel started out as a noble vine (Jeremiah 2:21)
- Ezekiel used the image of the vine and vineyard later (Ezekiel 17:5-10 and 19:10-14)
- Later Jesus used the vine to illustrate rebellious Israel of His day (Luke 20:9-19) and also to picture the relationship He had with His people (John 15)

Why do you think God gave Ezekiel this illustration of the vine?

It is answering the protest that: “God won’t judge us; we are His chosen people; we are His special vine. We have been burned by past crises, but God will deliver us.” This illustration destroys this false sense of confidence in Israel’s status as God’s special vine.

To what was the wood of the vine compared?

How is the wood of the vine better than any other wood? God asked Ezekiel to compare the wood of the grapevine to the wood of **the trees of the forest**. If a grapevine has grapes on it, then there is obvious use for the vine. Yet if there is no fruit, then the value of the **wood** itself should be considered.

- Nowhere in Ezekiel 15 is there mention of *fruit*, either in the presence or absence of it. This was a dramatic way Ezekiel communicated that at this point in Israel’s history, there was absolutely no fruit to speak of. It was a non-issue.

Why would the wood of a vine be considered useful?

That is the point... A vine would never be cultivated for the sake of its *wood*; a vine is really *worthless* but as it bears *fruit*. What is *Israel*? Good for nothing, but as God influenced them to bring forth fruit to his glory. But now that they have ceased to be *fruitful*, they are *good* for nothing, but, like a withered branch of the vine, to be burnt.

Is wood taken from a vine to make any object?

The wood of the grapevine is useless to make a table, a tool, or even a **peg**. The wood from **the trees of the forest** can be used for many things, but not the wood that comes from the grape **vine**. Because the vine is crooked, it cannot be used for building. Because it burns so rapidly, it is of little value for fuel. Because it is soft, it cannot be employed where anything needs to hang on it.

v4 – What is the only real use for the wood of the vine?

It is thrown into the fire for fuel: This is the only real use for the wood that comes from a grapevine. This is especially true if it is already partially burned (**the fire devours both ends of it**). It is then no longer **useful for any work**.

Ezek 15:6-8 – The people of the useless wood

“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; 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. Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have persisted in unfaithfulness,’ says the Lord God.”

What did God think of the people of Jerusalem?

So I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem: God said that the people of Jerusalem were like *the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest*. They had no fruit and the remaining wood was of no use. Like *the wood of the vine* they were fit only for burning.

I will set My face against them: In the strongest terms, God promised to oppose the people of Jerusalem with His very presence.

How is it there would be more than one fire?

They will go out from one fire, but another fire shall devour them: Like the partially burned piece of grapevine wood, the people of Jerusalem would emerge from one calamity only to be devoured by another.

- While Jerusalem was spared from total destruction in 597 BC, they would be utterly consumed the next time the Babylonians came.

What was the grace in the burning of Jerusalem?

Then you shall know that I am the Lord: By telling the exiles the severity of the judgment before it happened, this work through the prophet would help reveal God to the people of Israel when the great judgment came upon them.

What would be the end result of God’s judgment on Judah?

Thus I will make the land desolate: God promised to depopulate the land of Israel, make the land virtually empty of His covenant people.

What kind of unfaithfulness led to the judgment of God?

Because they have persisted in unfaithfulness: It wasn’t only the sin of Israel that brought God’s judgment, but their *persistent* sin. They wouldn’t stop their idolatry and wickedness.

THE HARLOT WIFE OF YAHWEH

In this poetic description of Israel’s history, one could match details of the story with events in Israel’s history – such as saying the “marriage covenant” described in Ezekiel 16:8 was the covenant made with Yahweh at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:7-8). Still, we don’t have to find a specific event or season of Israel’s history for each detail; this is prophetic poetry, and truly describes the relationship in its impressions.

- Here, in the longest chapter in Ezekiel, the story is told in detail in all its sordid, loathsome character, so that God’s infinite abhorrence of Israel’s sin may be clearly seen. According to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the Mishna, the chapter was not to be read nor translated in public.
- Although there are many metaphors here, yet all is not metaphorical. Where there was so much idolatry, there must have been adulteries, fornications, prostitutions, and lewdness of every description.

Ezek 16:1-5 – Jerusalem’s humble beginning.

Again the word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Son of man, cause Jerusalem to know her abominations, and say, ‘Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: “Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. As for your nativity, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born.”

What task did God give Ezekiel?

Cause Jerusalem to know her abominations: This word of the Lord through Ezekiel concerns Jerusalem and the depths of her wickedness. Throughout this chapter, **Jerusalem** is used as an accurate representative of the people Israel as a whole.

What was the beginning of Israel?

Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan: This was true in the prior sense of God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) and when Israel as a nation came back to the land in the days of Joshua. The land of Israel was occupied by Canaanite tribes such as the **Amorite** and the **Hittite** tribes.

Why did God point out the day Israel was born?

On the day you were born: God used a vivid description to show how humble and poor Israel's beginnings were. There was none to care for her at birth; all other nations were against her from the beginning (**no eye pitied you**). Israel was hated from birth (**you yourself were loathed on the day you were born**). If not for the care of their covenant God, they would have perished.

What was the point in rubbing a newborn with salt?

You were not rubbed with salt: In salting the child the skin is rubbed with salt to make it firm and clean.

- Cutting the cord, washing, rubbing down with salt, and clothing the newborn were all customary legal acts of legitimation. In the neglect and abandonment of the infant in the open field, the parent legally relinquished all rights to and responsibilities for the child.

How would Israel fare without God?

Thrown out into the open field shows how lost and vulnerable Israel was without God.

Ezek 16:6-8 – God's favor transforms Jerusalem.

"And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' Yes, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Your breasts were formed, your hair grew, but you were naked and bare. "When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord God.

How did God intervene on Israel's behalf?

When I passed by you and saw you struggling: Continuing the illustration from the previous verses, God took note of Israel in their humble, hated state. They would have perished (**struggling in your own blood**) if not for God's grace-filled intervention.

Deuteronomy 7:7-8 – *t The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers.* It wasn't because Israel was so amazing or so holy. They were weak, poor, struggling, and near death. But God **passed by** and took notice.

I said to you in your blood, "Live!" When all their circumstances and all the other nations said *die* to Israel, God said *live*. He brought life to them and made them *thrive like a plant in the field*.

How did Israel fare under the care of God?

You grew, matured, and became very beautiful: Under God's care Israel became larger, stronger, and more mature. They became **very beautiful** and came into young adulthood (**your breasts were formed, your hair grew**).

- *your hair grew* refers to the metaphorical young woman's pubic hair.

What happened with Israel's maturity?

But you were naked and bare: Israel grew and matured, but had not become so self sufficient that they no longer needed God.

v8 – What did God do to help the naked and bare Israel?

I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness: In the figure used by the Lord to describe Israel and his relationship to them, they were grown yet still greatly neglected and needy. They needed God's protection (**spread My wing**) and His provision (**covered your nakedness**), and God gave them both.

Spread My wing over you: This phrase describes the symbolic act of a husband taking his wife under his protection...

Ruth 3:9 – *And he said, "Who are you?" So she answered, "I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing, for you are a close relative.*

How did Israel become married to God?

I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you: Above protecting and providing for Israel, God entered into **covenant** relationship with them. It was a covenant marriage, and God could say, "**you became Mine.**"

How is the analogy of God marrying Israel appropriate?

In earthly inter-relationships, the marriage relationship is the highest in sanctity, because it is the highest in the experience of Love. By this figure, then, God sets forth for us what His heart feels for us, and what He desires from us in return. His love is of the strongest and tenderest, and He looks for a return of that love in uttermost loyalty.

Ezek 16:9-14 – God’s care adorns Israel

“Then I washed you in water; yes, I thoroughly washed off your blood, and I anointed you with oil. I clothed you in embroidered cloth and gave you sandals of badger skin; I clothed you with fine linen and covered you with silk. I adorned you with ornaments, put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a jewel in your nose, earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty. Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through My splendor which I had bestowed on you,” says the Lord God.

How did God care for Israel?

I washed you in water: God described His care and adornment of Israel. He cleaned them and anointed them with fragrant *oil*. He *clothed* them in fine clothes and *sandals of badger skin*. God *adorned* them with all kinds of jewelry, and even put *a beautiful crown* on Israel’s head.

Covered you with silk: “The word for is a Hebrew word which does not occur elsewhere. The clothing was costly.

Embroidered cloth...badger skin...fine linen: These expressions occur elsewhere most frequently in the descriptions of the tabernacle, its curtains, and the priestly vestments. References to the luxury leather of which her sandals are made (*tahas*) occur only in contexts involving the tabernacle.

- The *badgers’ skin* is the same as the material used in the covering of the tabernacle (Num. 4:6ff.).
- Various translations use *sealskin* (RV), *porpoise skin* (RV mg.), *leather* (RSV). ‘Badger’ is certainly not right, because the skin had to be both suitable for shoes and also large enough for one of them to cover the ark. The likeliest candidate is the dugong, a seal-like animal of the order Siremia, which is found in the Red Sea; its skin is used by the bedouin for making sandals.

What did God feed Israel?

You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil: God provided richly for Israel’s every need. Furthermore, her special food, ‘fine flour’ and ‘oil,’ figured prominently in the sacred offerings.

What was the result of God’s care for Israel?

You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty: Because of God’s generous love and care, Israel excelled in beauty and was raised to royal status. They became famous among the nations, and it was all because of God’s **splendor** that He had **bestowed** upon them. It was not of themselves.

- During the reign of King David and during Solomon’s early years, Jerusalem was indeed a queenly city and Israel a prosperous kingdom.

Why is it such a powerful analogy to think of God as the husband of Israel?

This is one of the ways God assures His people of His love for them is to describe Himself as their husband. For example, the prophet says to Judah, “*Your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth*” (Isaiah 54:5; cf. Jeremiah 3:14; 31:32).

Since Israel proved to be an unfaithful spouse, would God divorce her?

Jeremiah 3:8–10 – *I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. . . . Because Israel’s immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood. In spite of all this, her unfaithful sister Judah did not return to me with all her heart, but only in pretense*

In this passage, God warns Judah against making the same mistakes that Israel, their neighbors to the north, had made. In their idolatry, Israel had polluted the land and broken their covenant with God. Due to the enormity of their sin, God punished Israel, and He illustrates that punishment like this: He “divorced” Israel and sent them away—a reference to the Assyrian invasion, which resulted in Israel’s removal from their homeland (see 2 Kings 17:5–7). Even given the example of Israel’s “divorce,” Judah remained unfaithful, as if daring God to mete out a similar punishment on them.

If God divorces Israel, would He return to her again?

Having just cause, God, the faithful Husband, “divorced” Israel, His unfaithful wife. To make matters worse, God had asked...

“If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again?” (Jeremiah 3:1).

The answer, according to the Mosaic Law, was “no”; a man who had divorced his wife could not later remarry her (Deuteronomy 24:1–4). According to God’s metaphor, Israel seems to be in a hopeless situation: she has been divorced by God, and, according to the law, she can never be accepted back.

- But then comes a surprising twist: God’s mercy intervenes:

“‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am faithful,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will not be angry forever’” (Jeremiah 3:12).

In the same passage in which God sets up a scenario of hopelessness for Israel, He invites His people to “return” to Him and promises that His anger will end. Could it be that God’s love is stronger than His people’s rebellion? The Lord doubles down on His invitation:

“‘Return, faithless people,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I am your husband. I will choose you . . . and bring you to Zion’ (Jeremiah 3:14).

How is it possible that God would break the Mosaic Law to restore His relationship with Israel?

God promises to do what the Mosaic Law could never do: restore the broken “marriage.” It was unthinkable that a human husband would take back his unfaithful wife, but God is greater than that; He can and will forgive His wayward people when they repent of their sin and seek Him again (Jeremiah 3:13).

So, what then can we make of God threatening to divorce Israel?

God used the shocking illustration of a “divorce” of Israel to stress their guilt before Him. But God never cut Israel off unilaterally for all time. He only asked that they return to Him and experience His goodness. In fact, after God says that He “divorced” Israel, He commands them three times to “return” (Jeremiah 3:11, 14, 23).

Where else in Scripture did God reveal He would remain faithful to Israel despite their unfaithfulness?

Another illustration of God’s amazing goodness is found in the story of the prophet Hosea. God actually commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute (Hosea 1:2). She did not remain faithful to Hosea. Then, while his wife was living in immorality, the Lord commanded Hosea to find her and buy her back. God’s purpose was to show the greatness of His grace:

“Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods” (Hosea 3:1).

Hosea’s grace toward his unfaithful wife is a model of God’s grace toward His unfaithful people. Israel had been chosen and loved by God, yet they were unfaithful to Him by way of idolatry. In Hosea, God pursues and redeems His estranged “wife” and seeks to continue His relationship with her.

What does this merciful characteristic of God mean for Israel relationship with Him in the future?

The apostle Paul explains,

“Did God reject his people? By no means! . . . God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. . . . At the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. . . . Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! . . . And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again” (Romans 11:1–6, 11, 23).

How can a divorced wife return and be restored?

The law forbade it, but *“mercy triumphs over judgment”* (James 2:13), and God still has a plan for Israel. God’s grace in the New Covenant provided restoration for all who would believe in Christ.

If our salvation was dependent on our faithfulness to God, how would we fare?

Not well at all... Once, the incredulous disciples asked Jesus, *“Who can be saved?”* Jesus assured them that salvation is based on God’s power and grace, not man’s efforts: *“What is impossible with man is possible with God”* (Luke 18:27).