

# EZEKIEL

## Hard to Heart

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*"This is Another Vine Mess You've Gotten Us Into"*

15:1-8

Over the years Pam has gotten me the coolest gifts. Among those were my two Arabica coffee plants, better known as *coffea arabica*.

You might not be aware of this, but coffee isn't a big crop here in the valley. Growing conditions are not ideal.

According to the experts,

The best growing conditions are in a temperature range of 65 degrees Fahrenheit to 75 degrees Fahrenheit. Rainfall should be plentiful and the weather should switch between heavy rainfall and sunshine to bring the berries to full maturity.

We need to grow the plants indoors and really monitor them. It's going to be an uphill battle to get them to flower and produce beans which, by the way, takes four years.

The plants are meaningful to me so I'm trying to give them the attention they deserve to keep them healthy so they will be fruitful. Just replanted them this weekend, as a matter of fact, and have been misting them regularly.

The Lord considers the nation of Israel as His vine. Listen to this dialog in Psalm 80:8-11.

Psalms 80:8 You have brought a vine out of Egypt; You have cast out the nations, and planted it.

Psalms 80:9 You prepared room for it, And caused it to take deep root, And it filled the land.

Psalms 80:10 The hills were covered with its shadow, And the mighty cedars with its boughs.

Psalms 80:11 She sent out her boughs to the Sea, And her branches to the River.

Trouble was, for all the care God provided for His vine, it failed to yield fruit. Listen to this further description, from Isaiah 5:1-7.

Isaiah 5:1 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.

Isaiah 5:2 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; So He expected it to bring forth good grapes, But it brought forth wild grapes.

Isaiah 5:3 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard.

Isaiah 5:4 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?

Isaiah 5:5 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.

Isaiah 5:6 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."

Isaiah 5:7 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.

Hosea echoed the same sentiment in Hosea 10:1-2.

Hosea 10:1 Israel empties his vine; He brings forth fruit for himself. According to the multitude of his fruit He has increased the altars; According to the bounty of his land They have embellished his sacred pillars.

Hosea 10:2 Their heart is divided; Now they are held guilty. He will break down their altars; He will ruin their sacred pillars.

Now Ezekiel, in chapter fifteen, is going to talk about Israel as God's vine. It's the first of three illustrations over the next three chapters that show Jerusalem and the Temple will not be spared from judgment.

Ezekiel 15:1 Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying:

Ezekiel 15:2 "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?"

God asked Ezekiel a rhetorical question. He asked him what the wood from a grapevine was good for.

There are a lot of different trees and they each have their particular uses. I'm not much of a wood worker so I visited a website to glean the following information:

- Mahogany is a good carving wood and of a beautiful rich red color. It does split rather easily. Mahogany glues well and takes a fine polish.
- Red Maple is used in woodenware, cabinetwork, and furniture.
- Silver Maple is employed a great deal in trim and paneling.

You get the idea. So, what is the wood from grapevines good for? God answered for Ezekiel.

Ezekiel 15:3 Is wood taken from it to make any object? Or can men make a peg from it to hang any vessel on?

Notwithstanding that some of you ladies make beautiful grapevine wreaths, in Israel the wood was considered useless. Nothing was "made" from it that had any real use or value. It wasn't even strong enough to make into a "peg to hang any vessel on" in the kitchen.

Ezekiel 15:4 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?

The wood from grapevines could be used as "fuel," but it wasn't really a firewood. When God said "the fire devours both ends of it, and its middle is burned," it seems to be a way of saying it burns very quickly.

It was burnt mostly to get rid of it and, as such, it was not an important fuel source. It was like burning your dead Christmas tree - which, by the way, I do not recommend!

Ezekiel 15:5 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?

It was useless before it was burned; it was rendered even more useless after it had been burned.

God was going to great lengths to exaggerate its uselessness as a wood. Now that God and Ezekiel were on the same page, the Lord gave Him the word for Israel.

Ezekiel 15:6 "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;

To the extent that Israel was only “wood,” they were good for nothing and would be burned.

Ezekiel 15:7 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.

Historically this describes the end of the reign of Zedekiah. Rather than submitting to Babylon, as Jeremiah was prophesying, the Jews were trying to make alliances with Edom, Ammon, Tyre, Sidon, and Egypt. All of that would fail. The time for deliverance had passed. God had determined to bring them into captivity for a period of seventy years.

Ezekiel 15:8 Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have persisted in unfaithfulness,' says the Lord God."

They had “persisted in unfaithfulness.” They were sinning, committing all manner of idolatry. In the Hosea passage it was described as having a divided heart and as bringing forth fruit for themselves rather than for God. Isaiah said God looked for grapes and found “wild grapes.”

I really don't care that much if I ever get a coffee bean from my *coffea arabica*. It would be fun; but I'll be happy if the plants live and look healthy.

But if I'm God, *I want fruit from my vine!*

Apart from bearing spiritual fruit, how did Israel compare to the other nations of the world? On most worldly scales of measure she would be grossly inferior.

It was to bring forth fruit, spiritual fruit, that God brought a vine out of Egypt, cast nations out of the Promised Land, and planted Israel in their stead. God intended that the other nations would see the difference it made to know God and to walk with Him.

The message to the sixth centuries Jews in Jerusalem was pretty plain. Let's fast forward to the first century. Jesus was going around saying,

John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

Jews would have been familiar in part with the illustration. But Jesus didn't say Israel was the vine. He said He, an individual, was the "true vine." The implication is that in contrast to Israel, which became unfaithful and incurred the judgment of God, Jesus was faithful and thus fulfilled Israel's calling to be the vine of God.

The "vine" is a reference to what you and I would call the trunk. The job of the vinedresser is to tend the branches that abide in the trunk so that they produce fruit.

In verse five you learn that **you** are those branches!

John 15:2 "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."

Who does Jesus mean when He says a branch that bears no fruit will be "taken away?" Believers, or nonbelievers?

- Could be nonbelievers. Outwardly they seem like branches; but they have no life in them, so they do not truly abide in the vine. When you follow this through, verse six is understood to be describing the final,

eternal judgment of nonbelievers. Judas might provide an example of what Jesus is talking about. He had, in chapter thirteen, been dismissed, “taken away.” Outwardly he seemed like a branch, but he never was abiding in the vine. Now he was headed for the eternal fires of Hell, described in verse six.

- Other Bible scholars say that Jesus was only talking to and about believers in these verses. So, will believers forfeit salvation and perish eternally? No. Verse six can be applied to the believer’s loss of reward at the Judgement Seat of Jesus Christ. The “fire” and the “burning” are what is described in First Corinthians 3:11-15.

(I should mention that other Bible scholars point out that “take away” might also refer to a believer’s premature death. There are instances in the New Testament of unfruitful believers dying prematurely as God disciplines them).

I’d like to suggest that Jesus is speaking to anyone who is not bearing fruit in his or her life.

- If there is no fruit in your life, you may be a nonbeliever. Regardless your outward attachment to the church or to Christians, you may never have been saved. If so, you will be taken away, cast out, thrown into the eternal fires of Hell and burned – unless you repent and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior!
- It’s also only too possible that you are a Christian, but are unfruitful. The passage we read in First Corinthians indicates it is possible to be an unfruitful Christian. You need to begin to bear fruit so as not to suffer the loss of reward when the fire reveals it at the Judgement Seat of Jesus Christ. And you certainly don’t want the Lord to discipline you with a premature death!

Let’s say you are a believer. According to Jesus, you can bear “fruit,” “more fruit,” and “much fruit.” Listen to verse two again:

John 15:2 "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."

If you are “in” Jesus, a believer but not bearing fruit, the Father will first “take” you “away.” The Greek word for take away can mean *lift up* or *raise up*. It’s not necessarily a picture of useless branches being removed. It’s more a picture of them being refreshed. The vinedresser lifts them up to get more of the sun’s light; he puts them in a position to encourage “fruit.”

This is precisely how grapes are grown - on trellises, lifting them up.

The Father will somehow lift you more into the light of His Son, Jesus!

If you *are* bearing fruit, the Father will “prune” you so that you bear even “more fruit.” This word “prune” can mean to cut, but it can also mean to *cleanse*. It’s not the application of pruning shears, but rather the cleaning off of the branch with pure water. Vinedressers still use this technique as a gentle way to encourage fruit on the branches.

I know this is the meaning here because of what Jesus says next, in verse three:

John 15:3 "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you."

The Father isn’t lopping you off; He’s lifting you up! He isn’t cutting you; He’s cleansing you! He exposes you to the Son of God through the Word of God to produce “fruit” and “more fruit” in your life.

With this as background, Jesus introduces your part in all this.

John 15:4 "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

John 15:5 "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."

The illustration is simple: The branch is totally dependent upon the vine to live and to produce fruit. Abide in Jesus and you will produce fruit, more fruit, and much fruit.

John 15:6 "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."

- As I said, this certainly can apply to nonbelievers. The word "cast out" is used elsewhere by Jesus to describe the casting out to Hell of nonbelievers at the end of the age.
- It can certainly refer to a believer's premature death or loss of reward.

Let this verse speaks to you who are unfruitful – nonbeliever or believer.

Chuck Smith puts fruitfulness into perspective, saying,

One of our biggest problems is that we tend to be more interested in what we do than in what we are, while God is more interested in what we are than in what we do. He looks for fruit; we try to produce works.

What fruit does God want to produce in you? Love. Not the feeling of love, or love as an emotion but love as an action. Read Galatians five. The fruit of His Spirit is love, described as "joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control."

Do these things characterize your life? Ask for them and the Father delights to produce them.